A METAPHYSICS OF FAITH AND REASON: MYSTICAL AND TRINITARIAN
ELEMENTS IN HEGEL’S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

A Dissertation in
Philosophy
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

December 2017
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation seeks to respond to the charge of atheism and nihilism brought against Hegel’s philosophy of religion by Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank. Žižek presents an interpretation wherein the Hegelian concept of absolute spirit is reduced to a non-theology of pure immanence, the result of which is a species of atheism. The force of Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative lies in the fact that the incarnate divine expresses the alienation of God from himself; in other words, the figure of Christ expresses the fact that there is no God. According to Žižek, this is the revolutionary insight of Hegel’s logic of absolute spirit. By contrast, Milbank argues that dialectical logic is a consequence of Hegel’s indebtedness to a Protestant metanarrative; as a result, his metaphysics cannot admit paradoxical (Catholic) logic which is required in a genuinely theistic account of the divine. Both Milbank and Žižek, therefore, conclude that Hegel’s theology is fundamentally atheistic and nihilistic at its core.

Contra these interpretations, I argue that Hegel’s logic of absolute spirit is properly ontotheological and therefore belongs to the theistic tradition. My dissertation does not attempt to say that Hegel’s theology belongs to a specific theistic tradition as many contemporary scholars have attempted to do; rather, it only defends Hegelian ontotheology against the charge of atheism by highlighting the genuinely theistic logic at work. Contra Žižek, I argue that Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative does not reveal a wholly tragic divine that has lost all faith in itself; nor does it seek to show that the death of God leads to a thoroughly immanent spirit. Instead, Hegel’s logic of absolute spirit always has for its goal the development of the concrete subjectivity (authentic freedom) of spirit. Given this aim, spirit cannot lose all claims to transcendence, but must include a genuine species of transcendence within itself. This kind of transcendence is clearly not the hyper-eminence of the distant sovereign, but is instead a stronger sense of transcendence wherein God existentially completes himself as Subject.

Contra Milbank’s view that Protestant theology is fundamentally atheistic insofar as it seeks to immanentize God, I advance the view that Hegelian ontotheology leads toward a theory of mutual immanence wherein the respective identities of the divine and the non-divine do not collapse into self-sameness. Similarly, the notion that Protestantism supports dialectical logic
insofar as dialectical logic cannot maintain paradox is, in my view, grounded on a fundamental logical mistake which claims that paradox and contradiction are one and the same. Dialectical logic seeks to resolve contradictions which, by their very nature, reveal an inconsistency in the understanding. Paradoxes, however, are composed of two mutually exclusive terms which do not automatically render a concept incoherent; indeed, speculative reason is precisely the ability to grasp and maintain paradox without falling into inconsistency. Stated more simply, there is nothing in the concept of paradox that dialectical logic needs to resolve insofar as the two terms are speculatively grasped. And, if paradoxical reasoning is truly the hallmark of theistic thought, as Milbank claims, then his critique that Hegelian ontotheology is atheistic falls apart.

What is at stake in these responses to the charges of atheism and nihilism is the following: it is my view that by reducing or eliminating the theistic element in Hegelian theology, we sacrifice the richest elements of his philosophical enterprise. Hegel’s dialectical logic, abstracted from its concrete implications concerning the unity of the divine and the non-divine, is reduced to an empty formalism of the kind he encountered among his predecessors and which he explicitly rejects. The Hegelian narrative of absolute spirit is at its core an attempt to illustrate the intrinsic unity of faith and reason; if we take this seriously, this suggests that there is no reason without faith just as there is no faith without reason.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. vi

INTRODUCTION: RESISTING THE CHARGE OF ATHEISM IN HEGEL’S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION .............................................................................................................................. 1
Work Cited .............................................................................................................................. 23

CHAPTER ONE: SEE WHAT LOVE: HEGEL’S SPECULATIVE REWORKING OF THE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE .................................................................................................................. 25
Hegel’s Concept of the Christian Trinity .................................................................................. 41
The Generosity of Spirit’s Self-Determination ..................................................................... 50
Mystical Elements of Speculative Knowledge ..................................................................... 59
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 72
Work Cited ............................................................................................................................. 74

CHAPTER TWO: RESURRECTING RELIGION: REINSTATING THEOLOGY IN AN ERA OF IDEOLOGICAL DESPAIR ........................................................................................................ 78
Žižek and Milbank: A ‘Non-Conversation’ on Hegel ............................................................... 81
God Made in the Image of Man: On Žižek’s Reading of the Hegelian Christian Narrative .... 87
Implied Nihilism in the Protestant Metanarrative: Milbank’s Critique of Hegelian Ontotheology ............................................................................................................................ 106
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 118
Work Cited ............................................................................................................................. 120

CHAPTER THREE: TOWARD MUTUAL IMMANENCE: ECKHART’S MYSTICISM IN THE DEBATE BETWEEN ŽIŽEK AND MILBANK .................................................................................... 122
The Absolution of Spirit ........................................................................................................ 127
The Double Ecstasy of God and World: Toward a Theory of Mutual Immanence .............. 136
To Become No-Thing: Eckhart and Hegel on Identity and Difference ................................. 142
The Divinization of Spiritual Being ....................................................................................... 152
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 161
Work Cited ............................................................................................................................. 168

CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 170
Work Cited ............................................................................................................................. 180

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................................... 181
Acknowledgements

This project has been made possible by family, friends, and colleagues who, with their help and support, have given me the opportunity, space, and confidence to pursue it.

To my husband, Marco: thank you for your unwavering faith in me, for the countless philosophical and theological discussions which have made my thought more rigorous, and for always standing by my side. To my family: thank you for your loving patience, as ever (a big thank you especially to Aleksandr and Kim who gave me the opportunity and space to complete this project on the eve of their wedding). To my extended family: a giant thank you to Ashley and Dan who always bring light wherever they go; to Katie, for your continuous support; to Will, Lindsey, Danny, Axelle, and Ryan – much love and thanks always.

To Robert Bernasconi, thank you for your continuous encouragement, for taking the time to read and meticulously revise my work, and for your faith in me as a student of philosophy. To Amy Allen, Brady Bowman, and Daniel Purdy, my sincerest thanks for your time, your knowledge, and your support throughout this endeavor.
Introduction:  
Resisting the Charge of Atheism in Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion

Hegelian scholarship has long been divided with respect to the role of Hegel’s more theological concepts at work in his philosophical enterprise. From a contemporary standpoint, the debate includes those who believe Hegel’s theology conforms to a Christian theodicy albeit with some heterodox elements (Stephen Houlgate, Peter C. Hodgson, Alan M. Olson, Glenn Alexander Magee, John Burbridge); others believe Hegel’s theology is primarily metaphorical, that his use of Christian concepts and vocabulary serves only to demonstrate the logical or narrative development of spirit, a concept which ultimately supersedes the Christian spirit by removing the traditional appeal to transcendence typically found within that monotheistic tradition (Slavoj Žižek, Cyril O’Regan, John W. Cooper).¹ Others still, following a less charitable reading of Hegel’s metaphysics, maintain that not only does Hegel’s concept of spirit indicate a marked deviation from Christian orthodoxy, it is in itself an empty concept grounded in sheer negativity, in an agonistic nothingness from which nothing can logically or existentially emerge (William Desmond, John Milbank).

The first difficulty in establishing which interpretation of Hegel’s theology is most persuasive lies in the numerous and varied sources upon which Hegel draws in order to advance his speculative redescription of the Christian narrative. We find traces – some more substantial than others – of medieval Christian mysticism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Spinozism, and Lutheranism throughout Hegel’s theological project. Because of this, the tendency has been to try to establish which influence carries the most weight in Hegel’s work in

¹ I am including those who maintain that Hegel is a panentheist under this heading because they generally distinguish panentheism from Christian theism insofar as Christian theism, according to a narrow orthodox reading, does not admit the necessity of creation/evil and attempts to uphold the absolute perfection of God.
order to demonstrate his particular commitment to one dogma over another.\textsuperscript{2} There is much at stake in this, for in identifying the primary influence in Hegel’s theology, we are then able to claim that he is a theist, an atheist, a pantheist, panentheist, a mystic, a panlogist or something else entirely. With this categorization in hand, we then have the tools by which to draw out a single coherent project from Hegel’s otherwise vast philosophical and theological work.

However, there is also the danger that in our commitment to uncovering the primary influence in Hegel’s theology we set aside or lose sight of elements which simply do not cohere with the particular dogma we wish to underscore.

The second difficulty in uncovering Hegel’s motivation and goal in his theology lies in the fact that his view of religion undergoes a radical change in the course of his philosophical career. In earlier writings, we find that Hegel is highly critical of institutionalized religion due to its long-standing corruption and dogmatism. At the same time, he is extremely disparaging of the ‘Protestant philosophies of subjectivity’ of Kant, Fichte, and Jacobi. Hegel is adamant that faith cannot be comprised solely of an internal feeling, but must include rationality in its very foundation because its content, i.e. God, must be eminently rational in order to remain coherent. Included in this view is the notion that God must be knowable precisely because the concept of God corresponds to our thinking. God is, first and foremost, for thinking.\textsuperscript{3} In later works, we find that while Hegel is still critical of the religious institution, he develops a more nuanced view of Christianity in particular. The \textit{Phenomenology’s} penultimate chapter concerns the revealed religion as the final step the concept (\textit{Begriff}) takes toward its self-development. By the time we reach the \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion}, Hegel’s view of religion alters drastically: the

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{O’Regan is an exception to this: his book \textit{Heterodox Hegel} is precisely an attempt to draw together the various theological elements in Hegel’s work under a more inclusive framework; nevertheless, he ultimately privileges Valentinian Gnosticism and Boehmian mysticism insofar as they represent aperture and rupture respectively. Cyril O’Regan, \textit{The Heterodox Hegel} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).}
\end{footnotesize}
development of religion is the development of spirit which concludes in Christianity insofar as the Christian narrative includes within it the double transfiguration of God and world, of the finite and the infinite.

The third and related difficulty in interpreting Hegel’s theological enterprise has to do with which concept, according to the classical western philosophical tradition, we choose to emphasize. There is no question that spirit (Geist) is the central concept at work in Hegel’s metaphysics; however, a division exists between those who argue that spirit is first and foremost a logical concept, i.e. the ‘third term’ of the dialectical process under which its political, historical, and cultural development is subsumed and those who claim spirit is primarily a theological concept which includes the institutions of religion not merely as a social practices but as genuine sites of spirit’s development. Closely related to the concept of spirit are the equally important concepts of truth and God which, according to commentators such as Stephen Houlgate, are essentially synonymous terms. This stands in contrast to those who, while fully embracing the connection between God (spirit) and truth, nevertheless maintain a distinction between the two concepts: God is subject not only substance.

Finally, we must be extremely cautious in our approach of Hegel’s theological work, for it is too easy to make Hegel out to be a theologian wholesale and abandon his philosophical motivations, especially if the goal of the interpretation is to show that Hegel’s theology is not merely metaphorical or useful, but a genuine logical and existential exposition of spirit. In speaking of God, Hegel is not only considering what God is in himself and how humankind can come to know God, but the process by which God (spirit) is developed and revealed such that the finite and infinite realms are reconciled. While this historical narrative takes a decidedly

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Christian turn, one can argue that Christianity did not have to be the site of highest development of spirit: humankind only needed to arrive at a religion in which the revelation of God as truth (which includes the notion that spirit is triune) is its central tenet. This is not to say that this is the only aspect of Christianity Hegel emphasizes; however, it is to note that although Hegel devotes most of his attention to Christianity, the development of spirit takes place in all religions across human history. Christianity is only the most adequate expression of spirit; nowhere does Hegel say that spirit has to be Christian spirit.\footnote{This is an important point with respect to the debate concerning the role of historical contingency and logical necessity in the development of spirit. This is also significant with respect to more contemporary concerns regarding the privileging of Christianity which, as an institution, belongs to a particular geographical location and to specific political, cultural, and ethical practices. While Hegel certainly privileges Christianity over and above other traditions, his appropriation of varied and often contradictory sources within Christianity indicates a pluralistic openness which, while not abating our concerns, at least provide the possibility for a contemporary re-working of Hegel’s theology which is more inclusive of other traditions. Certainly, his ability to navigate between an increasing secularism and the crisis of faith in his time is worthy of respect in this regard, for it demonstrates a commitment to a balanced view which denies neither the validity of faith nor the philosophical appeal to reason and truth.}

With these considerations in mind, we can now address the goal and motivations of this dissertation project. As I have already stated, there are various interpretations at play with respect to the role of Hegel’s theology in itself and in relation to his broader philosophical enterprise. The goal of this particular project is first to demonstrate that Hegel’s theological insights are extremely valuable in two respects: Hegel’s theology provides us with a different route by which to understand the development of spirit which appeals not only to its logical or historical structure as is often emphasized, but also to its fundamentally spiritual (geistlich) character. Second, Hegel’s theology, according to what is perhaps a more radical interpretation, deepens and intensifies what is at stake in the history of the Christian narrative. Thus, from the standpoint of philosophy, Hegel’s theology makes clear the essential spiritual element implicit in it; from the standpoint of Christianity as such, Hegel’s work brings to the fore its concrete existential
value by relieving it of its abstractness as well as much of the institutional baggage it often carries with it.

The second aim of this dissertation, intrinsically related to the first by virtue of its content, is to contribute to the ongoing debate, as it is specifically set forth by John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, concerning the claim that Hegel’s theology concludes in a species of pure immanence, which paves the way toward atheism. It is my contention that Hegel’s theological/philosophical enterprise must admit both transcendence and immanence or else his speculative redescription of the Christian narrative falls apart. Given Hegel’s distinct aversion to dualisms, it is surprising that the view which holds Hegel’s theology leads to some species of pure immanence has garnered support. This is especially the case given that Hegel’s project is primarily concerned with overcoming the dualism between the finite and the infinite, a project which collapses if all existence is subsumed under finitude as is the inevitable result of these interpretations. In point of fact, while Žižek and Milbank disagree with respect to the value of Hegel’s theological insights from the respective positions of a secular ‘theology’ (a humanist atheism) and orthodox Christianity, they agree with respect to the ultimate conclusion of Hegel’s theology. Žižek embraces the role of immanent spirit in order to argue for a death-of-God theology which inverts the logic of the Christian narrative. Milbank, for his part, argues that spirit, as purely immanent, is insupportable from the standpoint of the Christian doctrine and that Hegel’s account thereby falls into heterodoxy if not downright atheism. Thus, both conclude that a purely immanent spirit signifies some species of atheism. For Žižek, this is precisely the benefit of Hegel’s theology whereas for Milbank this is to its detriment.

In Žižek’s case, the atheism we encounter is one in which God lives and dies, which is very different than the view that God merely does not exist. Žižek’s atheism does not deny the existence of God; rather, it denies his immutability and eternality as a transcendent being (the ‘Big Other’). With the transfiguration of God into spirit upon the death of Christ, Žižek believes Hegel can admit that God no longer exists as a sovereign figure. Instead,
In order to adequately pursue the first goal, then, we must prove that, contra Milbank’s and Žižek’s interpretations, Hegel maintains some form of transcendence in his theology, for a properly theistic Christian view necessarily upholds the transcendence of God, i.e. the notion that God is not reducible to finitude. In other words, if we claim that not only does Hegel provide us with an account which emphasizes the spiritual nature of spirit, but which also makes Christianity’s concrete existential value explicit, we need to show that Hegel does not discard or reject one of Christianity’s most basic tenets. This is why I say that the two goals are intrinsically related: the claim that Hegel’s speculative redescription of Christianity has an actual and not merely metaphorical value and function within his philosophy and within the world as such hinges upon whether Hegel’s theology is able to admit some species of transcendence. It is my contention that Hegel’s theology not only admits transcendence but that by positing the development of spirit according to dialectical logic, Hegel’s concept of transcendence is far richer than what is commonly understood by the term.

Generally speaking, the concept of transcendence within the theistic tradition signifies some form of spatio-temporal distance, a vision of God as the ‘Big Other’ (to borrow Žižek’s term), i.e. the sovereign being who oversees his creation from afar; this is either the ‘static’ pure being of whom we can know nothing or the moralistic judge often cited by more radical strains of Protestantism. Hegel is explicit in his rejection of these naïve representations of God which is

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spirit lives in the community insofar as the community maintains the memory of God. In other words, God lives only as a memory in the hearts and minds of his believers. See: Slavoj Žižek, “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for a Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic? (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 60-61. Milbank, for his part, argues that Hegel’s account is never properly theistic insofar as the logic of spirit (according to Milbank) does not admit a God who embodies absolute plenitude but only sheer negativity. In other words, spirit, according to Milbank, is a fundamentally empty play of self-involved relations. John Milbank, “The Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic? (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 137.

In other words, if we claim that for Hegel the Christian narrative is true, i.e. that it expresses an actual state of affairs in the history of humankind and is not merely mythological, and if take seriously Hegel’s claim that Christianity is the most adequate expression of spirit, then Hegel must admit some form of transcendence. More simply, if spirit is purely immanent then Christianity cannot be its most adequate expression since some form of transcendence is necessary to the concept of the Christian God.
perhaps why some commentators interpret Hegel as disavowing all claims to transcendence. However, Hegel is equally explicit in his rejection of the purely immanent conception of God as we find in traditional pantheism. This has led some commentators (John W. Cooper, Cyril O’Regan, Raymond Williamson, and Philip Merklinger) who wish to respect Hegel’s own rejection of pantheism while simultaneously avoiding the view that Hegel follows traditional theism to suggest that Hegel is a panentheist, i.e. that his concept of God is founded on the intrinsic inter-relation of the finite and infinite realms. This is a tempting conclusion, especially given its appreciation of the role both immanence and transcendence play in Hegel’s conception of God as well as its ability to allow for the fact that Hegel gives ontological primacy to the infinite rather than to the finite. For Hegel, the relation between the finite and the infinite is always asymmetrical – the infinite overreaches the finite. However, even if we admit that Hegel conforms to the panentheistic tradition this does not thereby discount the specifically Christian bent of his work: the history of Christianity includes multiple traces Neoplatonism and Gnosticism especially in its development in the Middle Ages. The theologies of Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme which have been linked both to panentheism and Hermeticism and which greatly influenced Hegel (especially the latter) aptly highlight the way in which Christianity absorbed aspects of other philosophico-theological traditions. Nevertheless, in spite of their

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8 *LPR I*, 1827, E374-380 G272-277.
9 A point which, as we shall see, Milbank fails to take into account when he implies that the Gnostic/Neoplatonist tradition is fundamentally contrary to the Christian tradition; see: Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 139. Nevertheless, it is equally important to note that Gnosticism and Christian mysticism retain a crucial difference: Christian mysticism is never an escape from the concrete world but is always centered on the Incarnation of Christ.
link to both panentheism and Hermeticism, it is clear that Eckhart and Boehme remain rooted in the Christian tradition (in Dominican Catholicism and Lutheranism respectively).¹¹

Given Hegel’s particular formulation of the transcendence of God, this project will argue that not only is transcendence necessary to Hegel’s theology (or ontotheology), but also that it is precisely because a stronger version of transcendence is present in his account that Hegel falls within the Christian theistic tradition.¹² ¹³ In other words, the criticism leveled by Žižek and Milbank, i.e. that Hegel’s account is atheistic, is implausible given his commitment to the transcendence of God which is analeptically guaranteed by the transfiguration of both God and world, the finite and infinite. For Hegel, the concept of transcendence never refers to what is generally put forward by representational understanding, i.e. the view that God is the distant sovereign. Instead, it always points to the highest development of spirit, to the fullest expression of spirit as subject and not merely substance. Thus, the transcendence of God (spirit) is, in the course of its development, potential (bearing in mind that the potentiality of spirit’s

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¹¹ While both Eckhart and Boehme endured their fair share of controversy regarding their works, they nevertheless remain rooted within the Christian tradition. Eckhart is more notable perhaps because he was put on trial for heresy however he was never condemned as a heretic. A bull was issued by Pope John XXII in which twenty-eight articles were investigated for the possibility of heresy but Eckhart immediately retracted his statements. Recently, medieval historians have been advancing the theory that the suspicion surrounding Eckhart’s teachings had more to do with the political climate of the church, especially the division between the Franciscans and the Dominicans, than with Eckhart’s actual teachings which could be read just as easily according to an orthodox interpretation. See: Francis Rapp, “Le Public de maître Eckhart à Strasbourg,” La Vie spirituelle, March 2002, 156:873-885 as well as Bernard McGinn, “Eckhart’s Condemnation Reconsidered,” The Thomist 44 (1980), 391.

¹² Following O’Regan, I use the term ontotheology to refer to Hegel’s theology insofar as it seeks to establish (a) the “content-identity of religion and philosophy; the specification that the content religion and philosophy share is the ‘truth’ or ‘God’; and (b) the further specification that the normative representation of God is provided by Christianity” O’Regan, The Heterodox Hegel, 3.

¹³ I contend that some species of panentheism may be included under the heading of Christian theism insofar as strong elements of panentheism (derived from Neoplatonism) are historically present in Christian theology. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Neoplatonist tendency among classical Christian theologians was also contested especially by what can be seen as the more mainstream Anselmian theism which emphasizes the perfection of God, i.e. God as the omnipotent, complete, self-sufficient, fully transcendent being. Nevertheless, in speaking of Hegel’s Christian theism, I maintain that he belongs to a tradition which follows from the Neoplatonist influence in Christian theology and which continued to develop through medieval Christian theology, Renaissance theology, and into Reformation and Counter-reformation theology.
transcendence is necessarily actualized). Another way of stating this is to say that prior to spirit’s development in finitude (which is simultaneously its development in-itself), spirit is logically complete or logically perfect yet existentially incomplete or imperfect. Spirit requires movement (in addition to an encounter with other-being) in order to become a full subject – this is the basis of Hegel’s concept of reconciliation (Versöhnung). Thus, if we move away from an understanding of transcendence as distance (effectively removing the spatio-temporal limitations of the popular/classical conception of Christianity wherein God resides in eternity while humankind inhabits finitude) and instead formulate transcendence according to the movement from potentiality to actuality, i.e. toward the realization of the concept, we see that for Hegel not only is spirit never reducible to finitude, but that the division between the finite and the infinite on the side of finitude is entirely overcome.

This is why the double transfiguration of God and world is crucial to Hegel’s ontotheology: what is often left aside in contemporary literature is Hegel’s explicit statement that in the transfiguration of Christ into spirit, the world, too, is transfigured into the ‘kingdom of heaven’ or that it becomes what it is already is, i.e. it realizes itself as a ‘vanishing moment’ of the infinite. Objections might be raised here that such an interpretation implies not only the realization of the transcendence of spirit, but equally the realization of the transcendence of finitude, thereby collapsing the distinction and leaving us with either a ‘God-world’ in which the two terms are virtually indistinguishable (a kind of pantheistic conclusion) or a claim that both God and world are transcendent (both are analeptically realized upon the death of Christ and his subsequent resurrection/transfiguration). The former position is untenable for it indicates a

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14 To use O’Regan’s terminology, spirit’s transcendence is ‘proleptically’ ensured and ‘analeptically’ fulfilled. See: O’Regan, Heterodox Hegel, 298. Robert Williams argues a similar point in speaking of Hegelian theogenesis: “There are in God lower and higher stages and states; therefore deity can, without conceding or denying its divine status, exist in lesser and greater (degrees of) concreteness and completeness, lesser or greater (degrees of) perfection” Robert Williams, Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237.
regression into pantheism. The latter position, while sketchy, is closer to the mark, for what Hegel is articulating in his speculative redescription is a theory of mutual immanence, wherein the distinction between God and world is not jeopardized.\textsuperscript{15} In what is perhaps a paradoxical leap, it is precisely the transcendence of God that guarantees the mutual immanence of God and world such that one inhabits the other without sacrificing their respective identities. The movement which captures mutual immanence is what I refer to as a \textit{double ecstasis}, which is fundamentally grounded in a concept of God as releasing or absolving. Hence, there is little question Hegel’s ontotheology follows the form of a theodicy and, additionally, one which is completed; however, Hegel is explicit in saying that it does not appear complete to us insofar as representational understanding understands the mutual immanence of God and world as a future event. It is only speculative knowledge, the \textit{unio mystica}, which properly grasps this as \textit{present}.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, at the heart of the debate concerning Hegel’s theological position lies the question of transcendence. If we can agree that Hegel’s ontotheology necessarily includes the transcendence of God, we can then argue compellingly, I believe, that Hegel’s account falls in line with the Christian theistic tradition.\textsuperscript{17} This is no small claim, for there are several crucial issues at stake in maintaining that Hegelian ontotheology is fundamentally theistic. Of particular significance is our understanding of the actuality and movement of spirit which, if interpreted within an atheistic framework, quickly loses its force and vitality, as Milbank and Desmond correctly point out. Additionally, the ontological separation of God and world such that even in the reconciliatory movement of spirit their respective identities remain distinct relies on a theistic

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\textsuperscript{15} This is why the label ‘panentheism’ might be appropriate; however, it is difficult in this case to separate panentheism from Christian theism since both endorse a view of mutual immanence between God and world.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{LPR} 3, 1824, E187-188 G121-122.\textsuperscript{17} This does not imply that Hegel is an orthodox Christian thinker or that he commits himself to a ‘classical’ Christian theism which upholds the view that God is fully transcendent and has little to no relation to the world. Rather, it is to say that Hegel’s ontotheology belongs to the history of the development of what is fundamentally Christian theology. His account is not heterodox nor is it atheistic; rather, it expands upon conceptual structures already in place within the Christian theological tradition.
view; the atheistic interpretation leads either toward pantheism or toward the kind of humanism Žižek advances. Furthermore, the Hegelian project of reconciling the finite and the infinite fails if we reject the notion that Hegel’s account of spirit is theistic, for an atheistic position cannot adequately articulate a true return to unity but only a collapse into self-sameness. Finally, Hegel’s explicit position which expresses the asymmetrical relation between the finite and the infinite is set aside in favor of a unilateral conception of reconciliation where the finite and infinite are not returned to their original unity but made identical. In other words, finitude is understood solely as a region of the infinite, not as embodying genuine other-being; in consequence, the return of the finite to its original unity with the infinite is purely formal – it is not a genuine reconciliation (this is the substance of Milbank’s critique).

Hence, if we are to show contra Žižek and Milbank that Hegel’s ontotheology does not fall into either version of atheism (humanist atheism or non-theism), we must demonstrate that his account develops and upholds the theistic elements listed here. Some might object that by advancing the idea that Hegel belongs to the Christian theistic tradition, this project is apologetic in its motivation; however, I am less interested in demonstrating that Hegel held a personal commitment to a specific version of Christian doctrine and more interested in highlighting the way in which his ontotheology draws upon and confirms crucial aspects of fundamentally Christian (and therefore theistic) concepts. In other words, I argue only that Hegel’s philosophico-theology is properly theistic insofar as the transcendence of the infinite is maintained.

This is one of the principle reasons I have chosen to address the debate between Milbank and Žižek, for while they disagree with respect to their interpretations of spirit’s development in Hegel’s ontotheology, their interpretations overlap with respect to their conclusions. Indeed, this
is why commentators such as O’Regan have remarked that their debate is in reality a ‘non-conversation’: Milbank and Žižek pursue different goals in their critiques of Hegel, but the claim that Hegel’s ontotheology is atheistic at its core unites them.¹⁸ This presents us with a somewhat surprising twist in Hegelian scholarship insofar as Milbank clearly represents a right Kierkegaardian orthodox Christian view while Žižek is indebted to a left Marxist materialist position. The productive value of their debate is high: from Milbank’s reading, we see exactly where he believes Hegel falls short of a properly Christian theistic account; from Žižek’s reading, we see exactly why he views Hegel as a precursor to the materialist atheism he endorses. Hence, a defense of Hegelian ontotheology must be able to address and withstand the criticisms of both orthodox Christian theism and materialist atheism respectively.

Bearing these considerations in mind, then, this project is organized in the following way: chapter one is primarily an exegetical work which chiefly highlights specific passages in Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion in order to demonstrate Hegel’s commitment to what I maintain is a fundamentally theistic position. Of primary significance is Hegel’s conception of the Christian Trinity which entails a thorough discussion regarding the distinction between the ‘immanent’ or ‘ontological’ Trinity and the ‘economic’ Trinity. Although Hegel himself never uses these terms to refer to the Trinity, some commentators have made use of this Christian theological distinction in order to show that there are two positions or locales from which we can grasp the nature of the Trinity and its movement. Briefly, the immanent Trinity refers to the logical structure of the Trinity in itself; the economic Trinity, in contrast, refers to the Trinity’s development and activity in finitude. Thus, creation, the story of the fall or the presence of evil/alienation, the historical presence of Christ, and the transfiguration of Christ into spirit are

all aspects of the economic Trinity. The reason this distinction is important is because it has been used to create a false asymmetry wherein one is privileged over the other: for instance, Žižek will argue that it is ultimately to the economic Trinity that Hegel gives priority insofar as the constructive work and concrete development of spirit takes place within finitude, i.e. within the realm of historical contingency. Milbank, in contrast, places greater emphasis on the ontological Trinity, i.e. on the internal development of spirit, in order to show that according to Hegel’s formulation it cannot engage in external relations, thereby rendering its economic activity ineffectual.

Contra this division lies an alternative interpretation which seeks to show that Hegel’s conception of the Trinity is holistic or inclusive: the Trinity in-itself and its economic activity comprise one Trinity which operates according to the same logic both in itself and in finitude. In other words, the Trinity’s economic activity is merely the earthly manifestation of its internal self-development. In my view, this is by far the more persuasive account of Hegel’s Trinitarian logic not only because it effectively corrects a potential dualism between the immanent and economic Trinity, but also because it corresponds to Hegel’s presentation of the Trinity which always emphasizes the correlation between the Trinity’s economic activity and its internal self-development. For instance, the historical presence of Christ is always correlated to the immanent Trinity’s immersion into other-being, i.e. to its self-othering in the second mode (the Son). The death of Christ, which is equally the death of God (the Trinity), always signals a resurrection which, for Hegel, is a resurrection of all three modes of the Trinity, not only spirit. Thus, what one undergoes the other undergoes as well; there is no separation between the economic and


20 Spirit always includes the first and second modes (the Father and Son); spirit is never a single form but is always triune. Thus, if spirit is present in the world, the first and second modes of the triune God, i.e. essence (identity) and logos (otherness), are also present.
immanent Trinities such that the death-and-resurrection of one (the economic Trinity) signifies the loss of the other (the immanent Trinity).\footnote{This point will be fleshed out in greater detail in chapter three insofar as Žižek’s position fails to take into account the resurrection of the immanent Trinity. According to his interpretation, the death of Christ signals the death of the Trinity \textit{in se}; however, he disregards the fact that the resurrection of Christ is equally the resurrection of the Trinity.}

In addition to a discussion concerning the structure of the Trinity, chapter one will address its character in relation to finitude. More simply, one of the primary arguments Milbank and Desmond put forward against Hegel’s formulation of the Trinity is that it is not properly \textit{agapeic} but purely \textit{erotic}. Since, according to Milbank, Hegel’s conception of the Trinity is merely an eternal play of self-relationality, the characterization of God as love can only signify self-love. Furthermore, the orthodox Christian view that God creates the world out of his own generosity and not out of any internal necessity is jeopardized if we admit, as Hegel does, that spirit’s self-development relies on the creation of other-being. In other words, God’s love toward the world is not altruistic but purely self-motivated. Again, the transcendence of Hegel’s conception of God is called into question here, for the orthodox view maintains that God is entirely self-sufficient; the Christian deity is not conditioned by the creation of finitude. Creation is a gift, not an obligation. However, this criticism can be addressed in the following way: the view that creation is a gift brought about by the generosity of God’s love does not thereby exclude the possibility that God is an interactive presence in the world and develops himself in and through his creation. The creation of free and independent other-being is necessary to the development of God; however, this does not jeopardize the agapeic character of God’s love. Hegel’s formulation of God admits both: God’s love is erotic \textit{and} agapeic. If God’s love were purely erotic, the development of spirit would admit a degenerative transcendence: the Trinity’s economic activity is purely self-motivated and its impact in finitude is epiphenomenal. Hegel’s
conception of God would amount to a revised version of the distant God who, while developing himself in and through his creation, is nevertheless entirely detached from it.

This interpretation, however, not only undermines the status of spirit but also that of humankind in Hegel’s ontotheology. It follows the more classical perspective that humankind is subordinate to the sovereignty of God. But, we must remember that Hegel rejects this representational understanding of God – this is precisely the problem, according to Hegel, of the Jewish religion of sublimity: God is conceived as an abstract sovereign, as ‘Lord’.22 Understood this way, God remains too bound up with the state, and therefore cannot be conceived as truly universal. By contrast, the Christian conception of God, according to Hegel, privileges the free and independent existence of other-being: humankind, upon the transfiguration of the community, shares in the absolute status of God. This implies that for Hegel, humankind is necessary to the development of spirit and not merely a byproduct of spirit’s own self-determination.

Bearing these aspects of Hegel’s ontheology in mind, chapter two addresses the concept of *absolution* or of *absolving ecstasis*. The interpretation that Hegel’s absolute Being is absolving, i.e. releasing or ‘letting be,’ comes from Peter C. Hodgson’s exegetical work on the *LPR*. He connects Hegel’s use of the term ‘absolute’ with the German verb *entlassen* in order to advance the view that ‘absolute’ retains its original Latin meaning ‘to release’ rather than the oft-perceived connotation of ‘totality’. My goal in the second chapter is to flesh out in greater detail how this conception of absoluteness informs a theistic interpretation of Hegel’s ontotheology. The work, therefore, while indebted to Hodgson’s initial formulation, is constructive in the sense that I attempt to push this concept of absoluteness to its limits with the aim of showing that it can respond to some of the criticisms brought forward by Žižek and Milbank. Of particular

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22 *LPR* 2, 1824, E434-452 G334-352.
importance in the concept of absoluteness is the view that God, as free and independent being, has for his activity the release of free and independent being: the creation of genuine otherness (an otherness which is not merely an externalization of God but which is radically other) is intrinsic to the activity of God.

This condition is particularly significant with respect to the role of the finite world in Hegelian theogenesis. Contra the narrow orthodox Christian view embraced by Milbank, Hegel emphasizes the necessary role creation plays in the self-determination of spirit thereby elevating finitude out of a state of naïve subservience and toward a realization of its participation in the activity of God (spirit). To be sure, there is room here to dispute Hegel’s theism insofar as the creation of other-being is intrinsically necessary to the development of spirit; in other words, Hegel suggests that God posits the world out of necessity. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that the kind of necessity of which we are speaking here is always an internal necessity: God is absolutely free in his self-determination; it is only his inner necessity which conditions the act of creation, not an external necessity (God’s nature is to be for other-being). The theological formula for this can be expressed as follows: God’s activity is to speak the Word. In ‘speaking’ the Word, in positing the other (creation), God fulfills or accomplishes his own activity. The narrow orthodox Christian view finds this appeal to the internal necessity of God’s action fundamentally untenable, but it is so only if we determine that God must be characterized according to the classical view of immutability and perfection (God is static pure being) rather than to the alternative orthodox view that God undergoes change (God lives).23 Granted, some might still object that even according to a broader orthodox Christian theology, the qualification of necessity is nevertheless detrimental to the notion that the divine is absolutely free. However,

23 We see this difference emerge in Anselm and Aquinas respectively; the former endorses of perspective which asserts the immutability or perfection of God while the latter admits logical perfection and existential incompleteness.
there are several strains of Christian thought, such as Boethian and Augustinian theology, which permit a compatibilist view of the divine. Additionally, the later Protestant Lutheran strain of Christian theology also suggests a compatibilist view.\textsuperscript{24}

Nevertheless – and without descending wholesale into a discussion of the history of theological fatalism in Christianity – we can say at the very least that Hegel’s own position with respect to the internal necessity of God’s activity, i.e. creation, is subject to debate as to whether it falls into a genuinely theistic view. Certainly, from the standpoint of traditional panentheism, the doctrine of internal necessity is not anathema, and it is for this reason that several contemporary commentators prefer to label Hegel as a panentheist rather than a Christian theist. However, as I have already indicated, various strains of Christian thought do allow for a compatibilist view wherein the absolute freedom of the divine is not endangered by an appeal to internal necessity.

Closely related to the concept of absolution outlined above is the concept of which, I believe, responds to the specific critique given by Milbank that Hegel’s Trinitarian logic is only erotic and not agapeic. Here, forgiveness (like absolution) retains its original etymological sense: to give oneself over completely to the other. Given Hegel’s logic of the development of spirit which has as its aim the goal of becoming objective to itself via an immersion into other-being, the concept of forgiveness is particularly useful in this regard. Forgiveness can be understood according to the immersion into other-being or what in theological terms is referred to as \textit{ecstasis}. Generally speaking, the experience or event of \textit{ecstasis} involves the immersion of the finite individual in God such that one \textit{inhabits} God’s being. However, \textit{ecstasis} does not thereby suggest the loss of individual identity; rather, the individual maintains and develops her identity.

\textsuperscript{24} Admittedly, this remains a controversial point, especially in the Boehmian theology upon which Hegel draws a great deal.
in the divine. At the same time, I emphasize here the concept of a *double ecstasis* wherein the immersion of the finite individual in the divine is simultaneously an immersion of the divine in finitude. In other words, the divine inhabits the individual just as much the individual inhabits the divine. The event of double ecstasis is the culmination of a theory which advances mutual immanence.

Absolution, therefore, can be understood as the initial movement in a logic of double ecstasis or forgiveness, that which in Hegelian terms leads to reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). The divine releases or absolves other-being such that it gains free and independent existence. This release from the divine, however, never constitutes an unbridgeable gap between the divine and the non-divine, between the finite and the infinite. Indeed, the potential for reconciliation is always present in the movement of absolution; it is presupposed. At the same time, because finite being is genuinely free and independent, it has the capacity to reject or turn away from reconciliation, from truth (this is precisely Hegel’s account of spiritual evil). What is required in order to undergo the reconciliation between the finite and the infinite, therefore, is a species of forgiveness (the double ecstasis) wherein the divine inhabits other-being (initially, the historical presence of Christ and subsequently, the presence of spirit in the community) and wherein the non-divine inhabits the divine (through death). The finite individual comes to realize herself as she knows herself to be, i.e. as a fundamentally spiritual being who shares in God’s being. The divine, too, undergoes a qualitative change insofar as spirit develops toward what it knows itself to be, i.e. a subject and not merely substance. By their respective involvement in other-being, both the divine and the non-divine are transfigured such that reconciliation (the winning back of one’s personality as concrete) is possible.
It is with respect to the concept of forgiveness or double ecstasy that Meister Eckhart’s thought is particularly useful, especially given that both Žižek and Milbank single him out in their interpretations of Hegelian ontotheology. While this is not entirely surprising given that the connection between Eckhart and Hegel has been well-documented, the heavy reliance on Eckhart, especially in Žižek’s interpretation, is nevertheless curious. If we add to this the fact that Žižek appropriates Eckhart, a medieval Dominican mystic, in order to draw out ‘pre-atheistic’ concepts in Hegel, this is certainly worthy of attention. In chapter two, I outline what I believe is the most important aspect of Eckhart’s thought that corresponds to the logic of double ecstasy. It is specifically with regard to the transfiguration of the community (which corresponds to the transfiguration of spirit) through death that Eckhart and Hegel coincide. We may even be able to advance the view that, with respect to this particular concept, Hegel is properly a mystical thinker. Thus, my own view with respect to the connection between Eckhart and Hegel differs from that of Žižek and of Milbank: the former relies on Eckhart to support the view that the ontological separation between the divine and the non-divine is “shattered.”25 This is very likely a more radical interpretation of Eckhart’s thought than he would have allowed. The latter, by contrast, upholds Eckhart as a prime example of typically Catholic paradoxical thought and is therefore interested in highlighting the difference in Eckhart’s and Hegel’s logic with the intention of showing that Hegel’s ontotheology is too Protestant (too subjective, too atheistic). Contra both these positions, I believe Eckhart and Hegel can be usefully compared, especially insofar as both develop a theistic concept of mutual immanence which always implies maintaining the integrity of the divine and the non-divine via their relation rather than in spite of their relation.

Thus far, I have described the first two chapters in terms of first, setting the stage for my response to the Milbank/Žižek debate, and second, advancing my own view that Hegel’s ontotheology is properly theistic. Chapter three, “Resurrecting Religion,” addresses the debate between Milbank and Žižek directly with the aim of showing that both misread or set aside fundamental aspects of Hegelian ontotheology which demonstrate a commitment to Christian theism. Žižek’s claim that Hegelian philosophico-theology leads toward a materialist atheism hinges on his view that only spirit is genuinely transfigured upon the establishment of the community. What he fails to address, however, is that Hegel explicitly states that the community itself is also transfigured: “a new world is constituted, a new actuality, a different world-condition, because [humanity’s] outward determinate being, [it’s] natural existence, now has religion as its substantiality.” The transition from ideality to reality, from the finite to the infinite, suggests that a theory which permits mutual immanence between God and world is far more compelling than a view which can only affirm the immanence of spirit. Žižek’s position is one which emphasizes the weakness or poverty of God, a perspective Hegel certainly does not share. In addition, Žižek’s faith in a weak God has the doubly negative effect of undermining the spiritual community: he understands the community as formed around a bare memory of God; in Žižek’s schema, religion regresses to the sheer yearning of the enlightenment Hegel explicitly rejects. Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative is misdiagnosed as something akin to ancestor worship, where spirit’s ‘life’ is truly just the shadow of existence.

Milbank, by contrast, interprets Hegelian ontotheology according to its conformity or non-conformity to what is, in my view, an extremely narrow view of Christian orthodoxy. According to Milbank, Hegel’s ontotheology is not properly theistic because dialectical logic cannot admit paradox, a concept which, in Milbank’s view, is fundamentally necessary to a

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genuine Christian theism. In addition, Milbank takes issue with the amount of necessity within Hegel’s theological view. He argues that Hegel does not allow for a ‘thick’ contingency, i.e. for events which “refuse mediation.”\(^{27}\) Milbank’s reading emphasizes the view that Hegelian dialectical logic inevitably seeks to resolve contradictions: its movement does not allow for the possibility of a contradiction which cannot be resolved, i.e. a paradox. This is an extremely important point since, in the Christian view, Christ is the ultimate paradox, i.e. the god-man who embodies two natures. In Milbank’s view, Hegelian ontotheology is unable to admit the hypostatic union of Christ, and, in consequence, cannot accept the radical character of genuine Christian theism. From this, the Hegelian concept of reconciliation is lost, for it does not effect a genuine reconciliation between two contradictory terms, but only gives us the semblance of reconciliation, i.e. the resolution concerns either two identical terms (God and world) in which case it is not a genuine reconciliation or, because paradox cannot be admitted (an infinite gap exists between the two terms), resolution is impossible.

Milbank’s charge against Hegel is, I believe, the more serious of the two, for it implies that dialectical logic cannot get off the ground. If we concede this point, the dialectical unfolding of spirit is an empty oscillation between terms and spirit itself remains undeveloped from start to finish. I contend, however, that Milbank’s criticism of Hegelian ontotheology only works if he understands dialectical logic as beginning with the pure *nihil*, i.e. the *nihil* as an *absolute* nothing rather than a *relative* nothingness which, in its pure indeterminate immediacy, is one condition for the possibility of existence. In other words, Milbank interprets the *nihil* as having the quality of existence in itself rather than recognizing it as a *limit* of thought and reality. The dialectical logic of spirit does not begin with ‘nothing’ as though the *nihil* were an actual stage of existence, but with *becoming* (*Werden*), i.e. out of the synthesis of being and nothing.

If we admit this point – that for Hegel spirit unfolds in *becoming* rather than in absolute nothingess – then his dialectical logic does not collapse, but instead signals the eternal play of relations (of positing contradictions and resolving them, of self-differentiation and reconciliation) that spirit enacts. It is out of this movement, for Hegel, that the pure plentitude of being is posited, i.e. through *becoming* which is always already presupposed in pure being and pure nothing. Hegel affirms the same logic in his theological description of the Christian Trinity: spirit (the ‘third’ term) is always presupposed in the first and second modes of the Trinity; as such, spirit grounds the possibility of the relation between the first and second terms. Spirit is *becoming* which is always proleptically maintained in pure being (Father) and pure nothing (Son). In other words, the logic of the absolute idea transitions into the logic of absolute spirit wherein the subjectivity of spirit (the product of engagement with genuine other-being) is gained.
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Chapter I

See What Love: Hegel’s Speculative Reworking of the Christian Narrative

A cursory examination of contemporary secondary literature concerning Hegel’s reinterpretation of the Christian Trinity reveals that, while Hegel himself had imagined he had overcome the division between transcendence and immanence, this dualism is still very much at the forefront of scholarly debate. For our purposes, I focus primarily on the interpretations of Hegelian ontotheology presented by John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek in the Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?. The former argues that Hegel is very much a thinker of the ‘absolute,’ a term which here suggests an adherence to a systematically totalizing logic which is independent of material existence insofar as it is incapable of actualizing genuine relationality with other-being. Thus, we can say that, for Milbank, Hegelian ontotheology reveals a commitment to the pure transcendence of spirit insofar as spirit is only self-relational.28 The latter, by contrast, favors an interpretation of spirit as purely immanent: God does not exist prior to his dialectical unfolding in history. “It is not just that God gives birth to – creates – man, it is also not merely that only through and in man, God becomes fully God; much more radically, it is man himself who gives birth to God. God is nothing outside man –.”29 Both positions lead to the view that Hegelian ontotheology presents some version of atheism: Milbank maintains that the self-relationality of spirit rejects the possibility of a personal God with whom humankind can

28 To be sure, this is a degenerative sense of transcendence, of which Milbank is well aware. In his view, this is precisely the force of his critique: Hegel’s ontotheology reverts to a pre-critical conception of spirit. See: John Milbank, “A Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic? (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 153.
establish a genuine relation. In Milbank’s view, Hegel’s redescription of the Christian narrative discloses a deep-seated Gnosticism which orthodox Christian theism cannot accept.\(^{30}\)

Žižek, for his part, believes Hegel’s ontotheology leads to a death-of-God theology which provides a foundation for a humanist atheism (materialist theology) wherein humankind is the sole site of spirit.\(^{31}\) According to this perspective, Hegel’s absolute Being is the God who has tragically died leaving us with a spirit who resides solely in the hearts of believers. Thus, Žižek inverts the logic of the Christian doctrine: in its classical formulation, Christ’s death signifies life via the resurrection, but in Žižek’s interpretation, Christ’s death signifies the death of God. There is no resurrection, no genuine transfiguration of Christ into spirit; instead, humankind locates itself as the sole site of spirit; it recognizes itself as the source of transcendence.\(^{32}\)

The consequence of these positions is the following: either there is no genuine difference between God and world because the world is merely an expression of God’s own self-differentiation (pantheism) or, conversely, God and world subsist in a state of deadlock since no genuine relation can be admitted; or the world is privileged over God insofar as God is dependent upon the world for his development which ultimately concludes in his death. In all three cases, the result is a conception of God which is irremediably at odds with Christian theism, which necessarily maintains the ontological separation of God and world, i.e. the transcendence of God, while embracing the actuality of reconciliation.\(^{33}\)

\(^{30}\) Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 139.


\(^{32}\) In this respect, Žižek’s interpretation clearly follows from a Feuerbachian critique of religion.

\(^{33}\) It is important to note at the outset that there are already two conceptions of transcendence at work in this discussion: the first is a ‘degenerative’ transcendence which corresponds to the more common view that God subsists outside of material existence and that his being is independent such that it does not rely on creation. This is the common understanding of Christian transcendence; however, it is not the kind of transcendence Hegelian ontotheology presents insofar as it implies the static sovereign Hegel emphatically rejects. The second sense, what I am calling ‘genuine’ transcendence is the view that transcendence is achieved upon the ‘completion’ of the development of spirit; it is the notion that God becomes radically independent (achieves full *personhood* not only logically but existentially) upon his determination as Subject. This is a completely acceptable conception of God within the Christian theistic tradition and it this kind of transcendence Hegel endorses.
In order to introduce what is at stake in these interpretations, a brief exegesis of Hegel’s critique of the enlightenment is in order, for it is precisely in the tension between enlightenment rationalism on the one hand and the crisis of faith on the other that Hegel exposes the same dualistic positions of which he now stands accused. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel provides us with one of clearest and most powerful critiques of the enlightenment project as it developed in history. In the first place, enlightenment thinkers strove to exorcise the irrationality from religion by highlighting the internal contradictions within the Christian doctrine, by pointing out the problems posed by relying on historical evidence or the interpretation of sacred texts, and by rejecting the occurrence of miracles and the like as positive proof for the truthfulness of the doctrine. We read that, “Just as it [insight] sees faith in general to be a tissue of superstitions, prejudices and errors, so it further sees the consciousness of this content organized into a realm of error in which false insight, common to the mass of people, is immediate, naïve, and unreflective.” At the same time, the enlightenment sought to establish a positive account of God which, paradoxically, could only take up the form of a negative theology. Since previous positive accounts of God relied on the very objects of simple faith that had been relegated to the category of mere superstition, the enlightenment posited a God of whom one could know nothing at all. In this way, the enlightenment was able to maintain the existence of God while simultaneously dismissing faith; construed in this way, God became an object of reason rather than of belief. Hegel writes, “One part of the Enlightenment calls absolute Being that predicateless Absolute which exists in thought beyond the actual consciousness which

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formed the starting-point; the other calls it *matter.*"36 To be sure, Hegel maintains throughout his works that God is indeed an object of reason insofar as God is most properly an object of thought, not only feeling; however, he explicitly challenges the deist position that one can know nothing of God. As Cyril O’Regan notes, “The real purpose and necessity of philosophy – and here Hegel is already forging an alliance between philosophy and theology – is, as Epictetus declared, to praise God, and knowledge of God is the highest form of praise.”37

The problem with the enlightenment account of negative theology, for Hegel is two-fold: first, it suggests that God is unknowable, that God somehow exists beyond the ability of mere reason. For Hegel, this position is untenable given that the Christian religion is the *revealed* religion; indeed, the very purpose of Christianity is to reveal its mystery, to make its truth known to its believers.38 Second, it limits thinking in a way that, for Hegel, bars any possibility of reconciling the finite with the infinite. For instance, Hegel criticizes Jacobi, among others, for giving us a regressive account of knowledge insofar as he held that reason could not penetrate beyond the finite realm.39 There is much debate as to whether this is a fair criticism of Jacobi especially given Jacobi’s later defense of faith as fundamentally rational, however, the point remains for us that Hegel is adamant in saying that thought does not merely behold the infinite but that we can have genuine knowledge of the divine, i.e. of God. Indeed, for Hegel, this is the

36 *PS*, 351 §578
38 Although Hegel refers to Christianity by a number of names, i.e. the revealed religion, the consummate religion, the absolute religion, and the revelatory religion, the fundamental character of Christianity is that it is given to us. O’Regan comments precisely on this point when he notes that, “Whatever the rubric, it is Christianity’s keynote that the very nature of divine reality is disclosed, and disclosed to a being capable of both comprehension and appreciation.” O’Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, 42. Thus, Christianity cannot admit any kind of negative theology if by this we mean that God remains unknowable to us. One might point out, in this case, that Hegel’s reliance on the apophatic theology of medieval mysticism is surprising given his own commitment to a radically kataphatic theology; however, mysticism always admits the cognizable unity between God and man. See: O’Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, 43.
purpose of theology, which as he notes in the first volume of the *LPR*, is the proper pursuit of
philosophy as well. We read:

> Consciousness or thought is what distinguishes human beings from the animals. All that
> proceeds from thought – all the distinctions of the arts and sciences and of the endless
> interweaving of human relationships, habits and customs, activities, skills, and
> enjoyments – find their ultimate center in the *one* thought of *God*. God is the beginning
> of all things and the end of all things; [everything] starts from God and returns to God.
> God is the one and only object of philosophy.

Thus, on the side of reason, the enlightenment’s critique of religion and faith went well
beyond its reach. However, faith, too, had to undergo a variety of revisions after the attack
brought about by the enlightenment. The enlightenment, despite its hubris, leveled serious
criticisms against religious faith which forced faith to reevaluate its own way of understanding
itself. Prior to the enlightenment faith, taken as a whole, was filled with internal contradictions,
corruption, and superstitious elements. The criticism made by reason served to show faith that it
had reduced its object into a static idol and instead demonstrated how to “deal with the Absolute
in a worthy manner.”[^41] In consequence, faith went through a period of *sheer yearning*, a desire
for the absolute that could not be satisfied by the apophatic God now established by
enlightenment rationalism. What Hegel identifies in the philosophies of Kant, Fichte and Jacobi
in his work *Faith and Knowledge* is precisely this desire for the absolute while admitting no
possible knowledge of it. For Hegel, this is the infinite grief of the philosophies of subjectivity.^[42]

At the end of the enlightenment we are left with two corpses: faith and reason. In the
introduction to *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel writes,

[^41]: PS, 340 §557.
[^42]: FK, 190.
Yet seen in a clear light the victory comes to no more than this: the positive element with which Reason busied itself to do battle, is no longer religion, and victorious Reason is no longer Reason. The new born peace that hovers triumphantly over the corpse of Reason and faith, uniting them as the child of both, has as little of Reason in it as it has of authentic faith.43

Both reason and faith, after having undergone the terror of the enlightenment, have been reduced to merely empty concepts; reason, for its part, is defined in and through its limitation – only the finite world is available to it. Meanwhile, faith has been reduced to the empty worship of an unknowable God of which nothing can be said. Thus, Hegel takes on the task of rejoining faith and knowledge not as two isolated concepts drawn together, but rather by demonstrating their original unity as revealed by spirit.

Hegel’s project, therefore, is two-fold. On the one hand, he strives to show that faith (religion) is a necessary aspect of human understanding without which humankind is relegated to a condition of sheer yearning; at the same time, he adamantly rejects the view that faith is irrational, highlighting instead the way in which faith and religion reveals a universal rational truth, i.e. the dialectical unfolding of spirit and, ultimately, the fundamental unity of the divine and the non-divine (God and world). Thus, Hegel is reworking both faith and reason in order to demonstrate their fundamental unity; at their core, both faith and reason are concerned with the same object: the highest universal truth, viz. God. Reason, therefore, cannot be limited to a bare knowledge of material existence but has to be able to demonstrate concrete knowledge of the infinite since the infinite, for Hegel, is precisely the highest truth of the finite.44

43 FK, 55.
44 Milbank concedes, “Real being and real truth must be infinite – this is one of Hegel most genuinely Christian conclusions!” Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 137. However, he goes on to say that the finite, then, according to Hegel, is fundamentally empty of being and truth insofar as it is construed as a nihilistic oscillation between being
Hegel’s reworking of the Christian narrative is ontotheological precisely because it attempts to show the unity of content of faith and reason as well as the identity of religion and philosophy insofar as both are concerned with this content.\textsuperscript{45}

At the same time, much criticism is associated with the term ontotheology and there is a great deal of discussion surrounding whether Hegel’s project is genuinely ontotheological. Some of this debate is made more complex by the fact that the term ontotheology has different meanings depending upon the interpretation being offered. Generally speaking, most commentators associate the term with either Kant or Heidegger; according to the former, ontotheology is meant to denote a species of knowledge of God which does not rely on experience but can be accessed \textit{a priori}. This stands opposed to the cosmotheological view which holds that knowledge of God is dependent upon experiential conditions; more simply, God’s existence can be inferred from experience.\textsuperscript{46} The latter, in contrast, uses the term ontotheology to denote metaphysics more broadly: because traditional western metaphysics is irrevocably bound up with the concept of God, all metaphysics is ontotheology.\textsuperscript{47} The species of criticism associated with the term are also different depending upon whether one follows the Kantian or Heideggerian interpretation: for Kant, the term is intrinsically related with pre-critical theological expositions while for Heidegger the term is associated with a broader view of

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\textsuperscript{45} According to O’Regan, the term ontotheology is associated with three characteristics: “the content-identity of religion and philosophy; the specification that the content religion and philosophy share is the ‘truth’ or ‘God’; and the further specification that that normative representation of God is provided by Christianity, in which God is not pure being, or goodness, but spirit as movement, life, and reconciliation.” O’Regan, \textit{Heterodox Hegel}, 3.

\textsuperscript{46} “Transcendental theology is again of two kinds. The one kind seeks to derive the existence of the original being from an experience as such (without determining more closely anything concerning the world to which this experience belongs); it is called \textit{cosmotheology}. The other kind of transcendental theology believes that it cognizes the existence of the original being through mere concepts, without the aid of the least experience; it is called \textit{ontotheology}.” Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 610, (a)632 (b)660.

\textsuperscript{47} “The basic character of metaphysics is onto-theo-logic. Thus we are able to explain how God gets into philosophy.” Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Nature of Metaphysics,” \textit{Essays in Metaphysics: Identity and Difference} (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 2007), 52.
tradition western metaphysics. There is no question that Hegel does give cause to view his theological project as ontotheological according to the Kantian sense of the term: in the LPR, he notes that the initial presentation of God to thinking consciousness is through thought. “It is in thinking that humanity truly exists for the first time. The universal object, the essence of the object, is for thinking, and since in religion God is the object, he is such essentially for thinking.”48 This is Hegel’s description of the abstract concept of God; the initial concept of God by which humankind first comes to gain knowledge of God. Thus, one can argue that given this starting point, Hegel’s account is certainly demonstrating some commitment to ontotheology. However, one can also argue persuasively that Hegelian ontotheology deviates from more traditional concepts of ontotheology if we consider his dedication to the historical (empirical) situatedness of spirit. It is precisely this aspect of his ontotheology which safeguards his account from falling into a pre-critical theology which endorses a non-reflective positing of transcendence.49 Thus, if by ontotheology we mean that Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative leads to an identity between faith and reason, between philosophy and religion then this is entirely correct; indeed, it is supported by his opening lines in both the Lecture Manuscript and the 1827 Lectures where he states, “Philosophy is theology, and [one’s]

49 Robert R. Williams argues that Hegel demonstrates a rejection of traditional ontotheology because first, he embraces a deipassionist account of God and second, because he rejects the abstract transcendence of God generally associated with traditional ontotheology. See: Robert R. Williams, Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 299. If ontotheology is meant to imply according to the Kantian sense, a pre-critical understanding of God which posits an abstract transcendent being then this is correct: Hegel emphatically rejects this conception of God for it reproduces the static representation of God we find prior to the enlightenment. Hegel’s God is intrinsically bound up with life and suffering; Hegel is not reviving a concept of degenerative transcendence. At the same time, I would suggest that Hegel’s project can still be considered ontotheological if by this we mean that he seeks to show the underlying unity between philosophy and theology or between faith and reason. Given his commitment to the notion that God is the highest universal truth, it is difficult to avoid the characterization of his project as ontotheological, but this does not mean that such a characterization is automatically to its detriment.
occupation with philosophy – or rather in philosophy – is of itself the service of God.\textsuperscript{50}

Additionally, if by ontotheology we mean that Hegel’s account posits the capacity to obtain genuine knowledge of God via thinking then this too is correct. The concept of God is, for Hegel, at the very center of thought and existence (the unity of which will become significant in the discussion of Hegel’s project).

An important element of the debate concerning the ontotheological status of Hegel’s account which must be addressed is Hegel’s particular emphasis on the Christian religion. In other words, his project needs to be grounded in the historical and cultural conditions in which it takes place and special attention paid to Hegel’s own ambivalence with respect to the evolution of Christianity he saw prior to and after the enlightenment. To begin with, we must consider at the very least some of the epochal movements Christianity has undergone which, in extremely broad strokes, include the transition from ‘classical’ Christianity to the Reformation to the subsequent Counter-Reformation to the Enlightenment. Any account, whether critical or apologetic, requires the acknowledgment at least from a general point of view of the dynamic and rich history of Christianity. Often, the mistake is to use the term ‘Christianity’ as though it were comprised of a set of unchanging beliefs, entirely coherent in itself, without any internal tensions or dissent. This generalization is plainly wrong, just as is the tendency to try to ascribe to Hegel a commitment to a particular theological tradition such as Lutheranism, medieval mysticism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, etc. Instead, he takes up various aspects of the historical and doctrinal changes Christianity has experienced from its inception onwards. He appeals to the medieval mysticism of Boehme concerning the necessity of evil, while simultaneously appealing to Luther and, at the same time, noting “Speculative philosophy has, in

\textsuperscript{50} LPR 1, Ms. E84 G4.
fact, been more in evidence in the Catholic Church than in the Protestant.” His commitment to both transcendence and immanence is, as Magee notes, a Hermetic position while others like Cooper argue that it is a ‘dialectic historical panentheism.’ Yet, his conception of creation is, according to O’Regan, particularly Gnostic given its appeal to the Boehmian narrative of the fall. Hegel’s Trinitarianism, by contrast, can be viewed from the Dominican medieval theological tradition of mysticism to which Eckhart belongs. No doubt there are also elements of ‘pantheism’ in Hegel’s narrative which is why the relationship between the revival of Spinozism among the German idealists and Hegel’s own work has also been the subject of much debate. There is also a rich theological tradition concerning the death and suffering of God which Hegel also actively pursues, especially that of the theopassianist or passibilist conception of God, which both Williams and Žižek highlight. Finally, while Hegel certainly disavows reliance on religious scripture as a means by which to know God, he nevertheless devotes considerable attention to the teachings of Jesus and points to them in the 1824 and 1827 versions of the LPR 3, and does so without falling into contradiction because he makes a fundamental distinction

52 John W. Cooper, Panentheism - The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 107.
54 Included in this debate is the question of whether Spinoza is properly a pantheist or panentheist, and the possibility that Hegel takes aspects of Spinozistic panentheism and develops it into a specifically Christian panentheism. See: Clark Butler, “Hegelian Panentheism as Joachimite Christianity,” New Perspectives on Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 137-139.
55 The passibilist interpretation concerns not just the suffering of Christ in his death on the cross, but the suffering of the Father. There are various versions of the passibilist ‘heresy’: the patrpassianist view which holds that God (the Father) suffers on the cross (with the caveat that God and Son are, in this case, not two separate persons but one being in different incarnations); the theopaschitic view which states that second person of the Trinity (the Son of God) genuinely suffered on the cross, but that this did not touch his divine nature. This view attempts to maintain the hypostatic union of Christ contrary to Monophysites who hold that Christ only had one nature (divine), which led to the heretical view that God suffered because Christ suffered. Finally, there is also the deipassionist or theopassianist view as articulated by commentators such as Williams or Žižek, which tend to maintain the view that God (the abstract Father) genuinely dies the death of Christ on the cross. For a brief sketch of the history and terminology associated with the death and suffering of God, see: Marcel Sarot, “Patrpassianism, Theopaschitism, and the Suffering of God. Some Historical and Systematic Considerations,” Religious Studies, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1990), pp. 363-375.
between the teachings of Jesus and the doctrine which only comes later upon the establishment of the cultus. While Hegel certainly shows concern over a dogmatic reliance on scriptural interpretation, he nevertheless references the teachings of Jesus and emphasizes their importance throughout the LPR.

Thus, there is no question that Hegel draws from multiple influences throughout the history of Christianity and its doctrine. In addition to this consideration, we should also briefly examine the historical context in which Hegel takes up Christianity as this plays an important role in his larger project of revitalizing faith and reason and establishing the link between philosophy and religion. What we are left with toward the end of the enlightenment period are two concurrent positions regarding Christian doctrine and Christianity more broadly. Arguably, one might say that these positions are not the product of the enlightenment as they have a longer history within the Christian church; nevertheless, it can be affirmed that these two perspectives on the church came to a head during the enlightenment. Certainly, the modern changes within the church had been ongoing since the time of the Reformation, but the enlightenment took up these arguments in such a way that served not only to criticize doctrinal differences within the church but religious faith more broadly. With the victory of reason over faith and the relegation of faith to sheer yearning, the Christian doctrine was subjected to a vigorous reformulation, one which affected not only how Christian believers understood themselves, but which also affected how we should understand the concept and experience of God.

The first position we see throughout the enlightenment is the rationalization of Christian doctrine which included not only the secularization or spiritualization of Christianity but also the move to hyper-rationalize Christianity so that it became no more than a political and ethical

56 LPR 3, 1827, E333-334 G256-257.
ideology. This is evidenced in the works of thinkers such as Kant and Locke who leave aside the supernatural in favor of natural law. However, Christianity remains useful in spite of its theological limitations: it provides a political, cultural, and social framework for ethical codes and conduct which are ultimately positive in advancing projects such as moral cosmopolitanism and humanism. The second more extreme position we encounter is that of the pigeonholing of Christianity as a religion where irrationality reigns supreme, where faith betrays simple ignorance, and where the church’s aim is and has always been to enslave individuals with its empty promises of redemption. Hegel himself, while avoiding the first position, actively pursues the latter in his earlier works. In the *Phenomenology*, too, he notes that faith is understood by reason as “an evil intention by which the general mass of people is befooled. The masses are the victims of the deception of a *priesthood* which, in its envious conceit, holds itself to be the sole possessor of insight and pursues its other selfish ends as well.” Both positions, that of Christianity made equivalent to moralism and the topic of corruption within Christianity,

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57 To be clear, there are two movements in the rationalization of Christianity. First, we find a shift toward spiritualism where the God of Christianity is made abstract; this is the view exhibited by enlightenment deism, pantheism broadly understood, and panentheism (again, broadly understood). This shift attempts to rescue the concept of God while simultaneously dismissing the personal God of traditional Christianity. At the same time, there is a shift toward scientism, natural theology, and atheism where Christianity is criticized on political and ethical grounds (e.g. abuse of power, corruption, etc.) and is, in consequence, viewed as a failed system of morality. In other words, the Christian church is viewed negatively as an anti-democratic system of power which not only fails to abide by its own rules but equally has no rational grounds which justify its power over individuals.

58 Closely related to the critique of the church as a form of political, cultural, and social power is a criticism of the doctrine of sin and salvation which, if understood in its corrupted form, is almost childish in its superficiality. What is surprising, perhaps, is that it is precisely this moralistic aspect of Christianity that remained after it had been eviscerated of its supernatural content.

59 See: G.W.F. Hegel, “Positivity of Christian Religion,” *Early Theological Writings*, translated by T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 67-181. In his earlier works, Hegel is not only critical of religious institutions, but emphasizes the notion that the purpose of religion is to spread moral feeling among its followers. “I remark here that the general principle to be laid down as a foundation for all judgments on the varying modifications, forms, and spirit of the Christian religion is this – that the aim and essence of all true religion, our religion included, is human morality, and that all the more detailed doctrines of Christianity, all means of propagating them, and all its obligations have their worth and their sanctity appraised according to their close or distant connection with that aim.” Hegel, *ETW*, 68. This is a view which Hegel maintains throughout his works, yet in his later works he distances himself from the idea that the sole or primary purpose of religion is morality; instead, he emphasizes the reconciliation between God and world as the principle aim of Christianity.

60 *PS*, 330 §542.
are even more developed among 19th century philosophers such as Nietzsche and Marx. While these criticisms are entirely valid, the status of Christian moralism is subject to a certain ambiguity: Christian moralism provided a framework which was used both by the church to exert power and by secularists who, while removing the concept of God from morality, nevertheless measured human behavior according to the same criteria. Hence, the reductionist view which maintains that the first principle of Christianity is morality facilitates the corruption of morality by both those who seek to use religion for their own purposes (both within the church and outside it) and the critique of those who castigate the church for failure to measure up to its own standards.

Hegel’s project, however, avoids falling into the adverse consequences of the positions outlined above. While he fully acknowledges the limitations of the church, his deep suspicion of the enlightenment era view of faith demonstrates his desire to distance himself from a critique which lumps together the experience of faith, the institutions of religion, and moralism. His attempt to rejoin faith and knowledge according to what he claims is their original unity reveals a keenness to circumvent the kind of moralism more often associated with Protestant strains of Christianity, the corruption associated with Catholicism and the secularist interpretation that Christianity seeks to undermine freedom. The last is especially apparent in his later works where he moves from a scathing critique regarding the institutional power of religion in his earlier writings to a reinterpretation of Christianity which emphasizes freedom as its original and primary principle.61 This is particularly the case with the more troubling salvific aspect of Christianity which is commonly understood as the possibility of future reward in exchange for

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61 Indeed, in the first volume of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Hegel is repeatedly critical of the secularist tendency of the time to avoid the subject of religion. He notes, for instance, “'Eternal damnation' and ‘eternal blessedness’ are themselves phrases that may not be used in so-called polite company; such expressions count as ἀγορατ. Even though one does not disavow them, one still would be embarrassed to have to declare oneself about them” (LPR 1, 1827, E157 G68).
fidelity or moral goodness. Hegel returns to a more orthodox theological understanding of Christian life which, instead of realizing itself only in the future, i.e. after biological death, and relying on ethical motivations, occurs through a spiritual death in life. This understanding of salvation is what allows Hegel to argue that Christian revelation is explicit insofar as it has already taken place and is taking place eternally in the divine history of spirit.  

Thus, what is at stake in this chapter is as follows: first, the overall goal is to give an interpretation of Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion which not only sets the stage for later debates concerning the question of transcendence and immanence but which also emphasizes the diverse influences on Hegel’s ontotheology. As I have already noted, we see traces of Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, pantheism and panentheism, various forms of Protestantism and even Catholicism throughout Hegel’s Lectures. Thus, the aim is not to say that Hegel is a Christian thinker if by this we mean he actively endorses one coherent doctrine; this is clearly not the case. However, what is often criticized in the claim that Hegel is a Christian thinker is his commitment to what appears to be an implausible metaphysical and theological view insofar as Christianity is understood as affirming the existence of God as the transcendent sovereign, the ‘necessity’ of evil, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and the narrative of salvation. In short, Hegel presents us with a traditional theodicy. However, what this critique implies is two-fold: first, it denies the validity of Hegel’s own extensive knowledge of Christian doctrine as well as his repeated emphasis on a rational exposition of religion and second, it denies the incredibly complex theological history of Christianity. Hence, the risk which often

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\(^{62}\) For Hegel, there are three ‘times’ which correspond to the eternal unfolding of divine history. In the first, God is outside of time in eternity; in the second, God appears as ‘past,’ i.e. the sensible presence of Christ in the finite world; in the third moment, the community is the now which at the same time posits itself as future. Nevertheless, this future is only such if it is understood within finitude; understood from the standpoint of eternity, it is present. This distinction rids us of the notion that Christian life only comes to its conclusion in the future, for it suggests that it has already been reconciled with the infinite but that this is not yet explicit for us in finitude and is therefore only perceived as a future but in reality is very much the ‘now’. LPR 3, 1824, E187-188 G121-122.
comes of saying that Hegel is a Christian thinker is that we mean something akin to a popular conception of Christianity which in reality bears very little relation to Christian theology and which often trivializes not only the regular ruptures and transformations it has undergone but also the theological and philosophical rigor which accompanies such a rich history of ideas. If, on the contrary, we say that Hegel is a Christian thinker insofar as he demonstrates a genuine and not only metaphorical commitment to a unique reinterpretation of the Christian narrative which draws upon multiple sources within the history of Christianity then I believe we can claim persuasively that Hegel falls within the Christian tradition. There is no question, however, that Hegel’s narrative contains heterodox elements and that his sometimes ambiguous claims regarding the immanence of spirit present a marked deviation from orthodox Christian doctrine. But the point remains: Hegel is not giving us Christian doctrine as such; rather, he belongs to a theistic philosophical and theological tradition which attempts to explain God through rational concepts.

The second goal of this chapter is to introduce what I believe are the most important concepts at work in Hegel’s ontotheology since these concepts will continue to play a crucial role throughout this dissertation. Of primary significance is Hegel’s concept of the Christian Trinity viewed from the perspective of both its ontological structure and its economic activity. The first section of this chapter, therefore, will be devoted to an exposition of Hegel’s Trinitarian logic. Equally important given the charge that Hegel’s ontotheology is fundamentally atheistic is demonstrating that the Trinity is not only erotic but equally agapeic. This will be the subject of the second section in this chapter. If God is conceived as solely erotic, i.e. as pure self-love, as Milbank claims, then the Trinity admits no relation to other-being since it is irremediably bound up with itself. However, if we can show that Hegel’s Trinitarian logic
includes the possibility of agapeic love, then the claim that he is a theist thinker can be supported. Finally, the third section of this chapter will be concerned with an exposition of Hegel’s claim that speculative knowledge is mystical.\textsuperscript{63} The significance of this is the following: it suggests that, for Hegel, the mystical is equivalent to the speculative and, classically understood, the mystical is properly theistic.\textsuperscript{64}

This is especially the case with respect to the perceived resemblance between Hegel’s and Eckhart’s theologies. Although not a primary figure in Hegelian ontotheology, Eckhart deserves consideration for two reasons: first, there are a variety of concepts at work in Eckhart’s theology which persuasively map on to Hegel’s philosophy of religion. For instance, Eckhart’s theology always privileges the speculative knowledge of God via the intellect; knowledge of God is never a matter belief but of rational, lived experience. In this respect, Hegel and Eckhart share common ground. Furthermore, both Eckhart and Hegel present the knowledge/experience of God via an account of mutual immanence which involves a movement I refer to as double ecstasis. Finally, both share a common goal in their exposition of the Christian narrative: to accentuate the transition of the human being from a condition of un-freedom to a condition of supreme freedom.

The second reason a brief sketch of Eckhart’s theology is presented here is due to the fact that the family resemblance between Eckhart and Hegel plays a rather large role in Milbank and Žižek’s debate. Žižek appropriates aspects of Eckhart’s theology in order to demonstrate that his radical immanentism is in fact a precursor to the kind of humanist atheism Žižek wants to advance. Of specific interest to Žižek – and of which he takes advantage – is Eckhart’s seeming

\textsuperscript{63} LPR 3, 1824. E192 G125.
unorthodoxy when he claims that without humankind God would not exist. In Žižek’s view, this ‘radical’ interpretation of finitude is carried through into Hegel’s thought such that the conclusion of Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative concludes in the absolute glorification of the human. Milbank, in contrast, sees Eckhart as a thoroughly paradoxical (Catholic) rather than dialectical (Protestant) thinker. Consequently, Eckhart’s theology supports genuine theism whereas Hegel’s ontotheology lapses into atheism. My own view, which I will elaborate in the following chapter, falls somewhere in between: there is no question that Eckhart is far less radical (atheistic) than Žižek suggests; Žižek misrepresents Eckhart’s thought by relying on especially provocative passages which can be read in numerous ways. Also, Žižek seems to conveniently ignore the fact that Eckhart is generally accepted among orthodox theologians as a representative of Christian mystical theology. At the same time, I find that Milbank’s reading of Eckhart as existing in strict opposition to Hegelian ontotheology is too drastic; without question, there are areas in which Eckhart’s and Hegel’s thought coincide. Milbank excels in his interpretation of Eckhartian mysticism, but he fails to do justice to the explicitly paradoxical (theistic) elements at work in Hegel’s philosophy of religion. Thus, Milbank creates a false opposition between Eckhart and Hegel when, in fact, their relation is less antagonistic and more familial than he is willing to concede.

_Hegel’s Concept of the Christian Trinity_

66 Žižek states, “What makes Eckhart so unbearable for all traditional theology is that, in his work, ‘the most fundamental dualism is shattered, that between God and his creature, the self, the ‘I’.‘” Žižek, _Monstrosity of Christ_, 33. Nowhere does he state, however, to whom Eckhart’s theology is so ‘unbearable.’
If there is one concept at work in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* which obtains priority over all others, this is Hegel’s reinterpretation of the Christian Trinity. “Without this determination of the Trinity, God would not be spirit and spirit would be an empty word.”

Throughout each version of the *Lectures*, Hegel emphasizes what he believes is the most adequate articulation of the Trinity, i.e. the dialectical unfolding of spirit. Even more significantly for us is that a great deal of the argument concerning transcendence and immanence hinges on a proper conception of Hegel’s description of the Trinity. Much debate has been generated over the classical theological division between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, categories Hegel himself does not use but which are fairly apparent throughout his exposition. The key point with respect to Hegel’s ontotheology lies in determining which classification (if any) he privileges: if he gives more credence to the immanent or ontological Trinity as some scholars claim, spirit can more easily admit some form of transcendence. If, on the other hand, he privileges the economic Trinity as others argue, then Hegel’s God is, generally speaking, more compatible with an immanentalist position.

In classical Christian theology, the immanent Trinity signifies the triadic structure of God understood in its abstract divine form; for instance, the classical representations ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ allude to the immanent Trinity. It is the Trinity-in-itself or the *ontological* Trinity. From a more popular perspective, the immanent Trinity refers to a conception of the triune Christian God which subsists in a beyond, i.e. which is not reducible to finitude or to the finite activities of humankind. Hegel’s own view of the immanent Trinity differs somewhat

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67 *LPR I*, 1824, E125 G42. Hegel expands upon this statement, noting, “The result [of rational theology] is that one only knows in general *that* God is; but otherwise this supreme being is inwardly empty and dead. It is not to be grasped as a living God, as concrete content; it is not to be grasped as spirit. If ‘spirit’ is not an empty word, then God must [be grasped] under this characteristic, just as in the church theology of former times God was called ‘triune.’ This is the key by which the nature of spirit is explicated.” *LPR I*, 1824, E126 G43.

68 We can say with qualification that the immanent Trinity generally refers to a species of transcendence: however, we must bear in mind that the kind of transcendence this implies is, for Hegel, degenerative insofar as it can be
from its more classical formulation insofar as he rejects the abstractness which usually accompanies conceptions of the internal structure of the Trinity. In other words, the immanent Trinity is not, for Hegel, representative of a purely transcendent God nor can it be conceived from the more orthodox interpretation of three separate persons sharing in one nature or substance. In Hegel’s view, such an interpretation of the immanent Trinity cannot be conceived as properly monotheistic; instead, the Trinity constitutes one being made up of three modes or forms.69 We read:

A further point is that in the Christian religion it is not merely asserted that God is triune but also that he subsists in three persons. This is being-for-self taken to the extreme, the extreme being not only one but person, personality. Being a person is the highest intensity of being-for-self. Here the contradiction seems to be pushed so far that no resolution, no mingling of one person with another, is possible. But just this resolution is expressed in the assertion that God is only one; the three persons are thus posited merely as a transient moment or aspect.70

The belief that the Trinity is composed of three separate persons or three separate forms is, for Hegel, the consequence of a representational understanding: the three terms of the Trinity only

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69 This view is not entirely heterodox and the nature of the three modes or forms of the Trinity continues to be a much debated subject among theologians. For example, see: Thomas G. Weinandy, “Trinitarian Christology: The Eternal Son,” Oxford Handbook of the Trinity, edited by Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 387-399. The question concerning the personality or personhood of God is also at stake here, for the notion that God is only a ‘being’ takes away something of the force or vitality of his personhood. Hegel addresses the personality of God in the 1827 LPR when he notes, “Personality is what is based upon freedom – the first, deepest, innermost mode, but it is also the most abstract mode in which freedom announces its presence in the subject…In friendship and love I give up my abstract personality and thereby win it back as concrete. The truth of personality is found precisely in winning it back through this immersion, this being immersed in the other.” LPR 3, 1827, E285-286 G210-211. Spirit is therefore person upon its development as subject; it is in and through the immersion into finitude that the infinite gains genuine personhood. And again, “In love and friendship it is the person that maintains itself and through its love achieves its subjectivity, which is its personality.” LPR 3, 1824, E194 G127. It is clear that Hegel distinguishes abstract personality from concrete personality, and that spirit must be understood as person only according to the latter definition. “But in religion, if one holds fast to personality in the abstract sense, then one has three gods, and subjectivity is likewise lost.” LPR 3, 1824, E194 G127.

70 LPR 3, 1824, E193-194 G127.
appear as independent precisely because God’s activity lies in differentiating himself from himself. What is more significant for Hegel in the doctrine of the ontological Trinity is that first, it claims actual knowledge of God’s intrinsic being and second, that it corresponds to the dialectical unfolding of spirit (it is the dialectical unfolding of spirit). We read, “God is thus grasped as what he is in for himself within himself; God [the Father] makes himself an object for himself [the Son]; then, in this object, God remains the undivided essence within this differentiation of himself within himself, and in this differentiation of himself loves himself, i.e., remains identical with himself – this is God as Spirit.”

This is perhaps one of the clearest and most succinct descriptions Hegel gives of the Trinity and its relations. We also clearly see that God remains the undivided essence (the Substance) within his own process of self-differentiation, confirming the view that Hegel is not giving us a more common model of the tripartite God but is instead appealing to the view that God is one nature composed of three relations, i.e. Father, Son, and Spirit.

For Hegel, the difficulty lies in demonstrating the substantial relationality between these three forms while simultaneously demonstrating that each is a moment in the eternal activity of the divine. Thus, while Hegel could be said to posit a ‘higher’ form of Being, i.e. the Godhead which is spirit, he nevertheless maintains the three forms of the Trinity while recognizing that Spirit contains this movement, this relationality, within itself and that each relation is constitutive of spirit and that spirit is not reducible to one form or another. Some commentators have attempted to emphasize Hegel’s pneumatology by noting that spirit is the primary element in Hegel’s Trinitarian thought. While this is not wrong, it does run the risk of reducing the universal (Father) and particular (Son) relations of the immanent Trinity into mere supporting

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71 *LPR 1*, 1824, E126 G43.
characters rather than showing that they are necessary to the self-development and self-
recognition of spirit to itself. Spirit is in itself relationality; consequently, to say that spirit (the
third term) is the primary element of the Trinity (or the primary ‘form’ of the Trinity) is to view
relationality as a one-dimensional event. The point here is that Hegel uses the term spirit to mean
something extremely precise; that by this, he does not mean that spirit is only the third term of
the dialectical unfolding of absolute Being, but that spirit is always already presupposed by the
first and second terms, i.e. by universal being on the one hand and particularized being on the
other. “In the third, we say, God is the Spirit; but the Spirit is also ‘presupposing,’ the third is
also the first. It is essential to hold to this; it is explained by the nature of the [logical] concept.”73

Thus far, I have been using the categories ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ and ‘Spirit,’ with respect to the
Trinity, but it is important to note that Hegel is highly critical of these terms insofar as they are
understood from the standpoint of representational understanding. He notes, “The Trinity has
also been brought under the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. This is a childlike
relationship, a childlike form.”74 Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot make use of
these categories as long we bear in mind that they do not indicate separate beings, but always
refer to a triadic relationality. Hegel frequently uses these categories not only with respect to the
immanent Trinity, but also to refer to the historical narrative of Christianity, i.e. the presence of
God in finitude.

In contradistinction to the ontological Trinity, the economic Trinity is understood
according to its earthly manifestations, i.e. to its activity in the finite realm. Included under this
heading is the narrative of creation (the activity of the Father – the initial act of self-
differentiation which is the positing of the other), the presence of Christ (the activity of the Son –

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73 *LPR 3*, 1824, E195 G128.
74 *LPR 3*, 1824, E194 G127-128.
the concrete presence of the divine in the non-divine), and the transfiguration of God into spirit (the activity of spirit – the reconciliation of the divine and non-divine, of the finite and infinite).

Many contemporary Hegelian scholars tend to give priority to this conception (the economic Trinity), arguing that Hegel is more concerned with the Trinity’s economy of salvation than with the Trinity in se. There is no question that the historical narrative regarding the Trinity is of the utmost importance to Hegel, and that the culminating moment of spirit’s development implies that the reconciliation between God and world occurs in the finite realm; however, we must always bear in mind that knowledge of God for Hegel signifies knowledge of God in himself, not viewed externally. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to uphold the view that Hegel privileges the economic history of the Trinity and one can argue that knowledge of God through history is knowledge of God in himself insofar as spirit undergoes its play of relations in and through history. The question, then, is if Hegel claims that God (spirit) exists outside of history, or even more radically, if one can have knowledge of God outside of history.75

There are various problems associated with both perspectives, i.e. with the view which supports a species of pure transcendence (Milbank) and the interpretation which supports pure immanence (Žižek). With respect to the former, the potential problem lies in conceiving the self-relationality of God. As we shall see in chapter three, Milbank argues (following Desmond) that the only conclusion we can draw about Hegel’s absolute being is that it is entirely self-relational

75 We read, “Thus the first divine history is outside the world, it is not in space, but outside finitude as such – God as he is in and for himself…We can then define these three elements differently in regard to time. Thus the first element is God outside of time, God as the eternal idea in the element of the pure thought of eternity, but eternity only in the sense in which it is set against time. This time that is in and for itself explicates itself by unfolding into past, present, and future.” LPR 3, 1824, G121. The difficulty here lies in resisting the representational understanding of God as subsisting in himself prior to the creation of the world or prior to finitude. For Hegel, this is an abstract conception of God. God, outside of time and space, is the Idea which eternally creates. Thus, we can speak of God existing outside of history (outside of finitude) but we must be cautious to note that this is an existentially incomplete God; God is logically complete insofar as his eternal activity is self-determination, but he only actualizes himself in the world. Thus, Hegel’s God does extend beyond the finite world; in this sense, God is not reducible to finitude. However, his actualization requires the world, and in this sense, Hegel’s God is intrinsically involved in finitude.
such that no genuine otherness can exist. In other words, the finite and infinite cannot be reconciled because no authentic rupture between the two terms occurs; there is only the illusion of difference. This is the consequence of Milbank’s interpretation of whatever claim to transcendence Hegel might have in his ontotheology: God is ultimately purely transcendent (or purely immanent) because there is no substantial difference between the finite and the infinite. The other claim regarding transcendence, which we have already seen, is that Hegel’s logic is totalizing: the concern is that the development of spirit is the only necessary aspect of reality such that the life and history of humankind is merely epiphenomenal. Again, this easily collapses the distinction between transcendence and immanence or between the finite and the infinite, for it suggests that the finite has no substantial independent existence in and of itself.

In contrast, the claim which supports an immanentist reading of Hegel’s ontotheology argues that Hegel rejects the existence of God (understood as an absolute Being which is not reducible to the finite world). This argument proceeds in a variety of different directions: toward a reformulated pantheism, a death-of-God theology, a natural theology, or a radical form of humanism. The underlying premise of this claim, however, is that Hegel’s concept of spirit is entirely bound up with its economy: the finite world is the only site of spirit. Consequently, there is no room for transcendence in Hegel’s philosophy – the history of spirit is the history of the world, the development of spirit is the development of the world, and knowledge of spirit is knowledge of the world. Most roads, then, lead to viewing Hegelian ontotheology as committed to some species of immanence. The concept of the immanent Trinity is only the “in-itself” of the economic Trinity. Nevertheless, this raises an important exegetical question: does Hegel in fact privilege the economic Trinity over and above the immanent Trinity?
There are at least two significant themes in Hegel’s *LPR* which throw this into doubt. The first has to do with the *movement* of the Trinity according to Hegel. Some commentators argue, as I have mentioned above, that Hegel’s Trinity is fully self-relational such that it cannot contain anything alien within its being. If this is the case, then we inevitably end up in some species of pantheism wherein the world is conceived as an integral part of God’s being or we conclude with a species of pure transcendence where God and world are mutually exclusive insofar as neither can formulate a relation with the other. However, there is an alternative reading which suggests that Hegel’s concept of God is *agapeic* and not merely erotic, i.e. that it is fully open to the other. Viewed from this standpoint, God’s relation to humankind is *ecstatic*, which means that there is a fundamental unity between God and world in the sense that each can inhabit the other without losing anything of itself. God is self-relational to be sure, but this does not prevent our conceiving of God as both self-relating and other-relating, i.e. God enters into a union with the other if the other ‘belongs’ to him yet remains genuinely independent.\(^76\) This is why Hegel distinguishes between two ‘Sons’ within the narrative of creation: “From this side the primal division of the idea is to be conceived in such a way that the other, which we have also called ‘Son,’ obtains the determination of other as such – that this other exists as a free being for itself, and that it appears as something actual, as something that exists outside of an apart from God.”\(^77\)

Second, and relatedly, a strong argument can made against the division of the immanent and economic Trinity on the grounds that any discussion of the economic activity of the Trinity

\(^76\) This distinction is entirely mystical in its formulation. The idea here is that the world ‘belongs’ to God in the metaphorical sense that creation is his ‘child’ or ‘offspring’. In the same way that a child ‘belongs’ to his parents, he is not identical to them, nor does he belong to them in the sense of property; rather, his life (biological, intellectual, etc.) is informed by his parents insofar as he inherits aspects of himself from them. Thus, the term ‘belong’ with respect to God never denotes something like possession or ownership, but always indicates something akin to participation or sharing. Humanity *shares* in God’s essence. This is an argument presented, for instance, by Eckhart where God and world maintain their ontological difference while simultaneously (paradoxically) sharing in the same essence. The human being is both God and not-God. See: Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2009), S. 7, 72; S. 41, 230; S. 49, 264.

\(^77\) *LPR* 3, 1827, E292 G217.
already presupposes some knowledge of the immanent Trinity. To clarify this point, Daniel A. Keating writes, “Any attempt to display the world of the ‘economic Trinity’ is the end-result of a process that has already taken in and mediated upon the biblical texts, and come to an understanding (even preliminary) about the ‘immanent Trinity.’”78 Gilles Emery makes a similar point, stating,

> The doctrine of the economic Trinity is no less speculative than that of the immanent Trinity. The revelation of the Trinity by its works is admittedly first in the order of our discovery of the mystery. But the doctrine of the economic Trinity is not only the starting point of a theological reflection: it is rather the last fruit of reflection.79

Given Hegel’s criticism of the church’s reliance on scripture and historical texts, it is clear the methodology is different; however, the conclusion, that the economic Trinity can only be understood via a speculative reflection upon the inner workings of the immanent Trinity, is demonstrated throughout the *LPR*.80

Commentators such as Hodgson and O’Regan, for their part, advance the idea that we should conceive of Hegel’s Trinity as holistic rather than maintaining, even conceptually, the division between the economic and immanent Trinity.81 In other words, the Trinity in Hegel’s

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79 Ibid., 443.
80 While Hegel is critical of the church’s reliance on scripture insofar as it has been taken up as the substance of faith, he nevertheless does not dismiss scripture wholesale. Indeed, he refers to Biblical passages throughout the *LPR* in order to present his conception of the Trinity’s activity. Thus, Hegel’s criticism of the church should always be understood as a critique of dogmatism and ideology and never a critique of the teachings of Jesus, upon which he relies fairly extensively.
81 See: Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 130-131; O’Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, 287-326. Hodgson argues compellingly that while we can view Hegel’s exposition of the Trinity using the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinities this is still somewhat misleading, for it moves us in the direction of thinking that there are two spheres in which the Trinity acts. While this is not completely incorrect – spirit does act in both the finite and the infinite realms – it puts us in danger of setting aside the holistic character of the Trinity. The point for Hegel is that the infinite and the finite coincide; they are not two separate realms, but instead give two overlapping histories. Divine history does not belong only to the transcendent concept of God but to the world as such. In much the same
ontotheology cannot be understood as either immanent or economic (nor should we privilege one over the other), but rather as one Trinity which acts both ‘outside’ the finite world and within the finite world. Thus, for both Hodgson and O’Regan, it is clear that God (the Trinity) is at once both transcendent and immanent.\(^{82}\) Hegel himself notes that there are three locales in which the divine history takes place: (1) outside the world, (2) the world and (3) the inner place.\(^{83}\) While this initially suggests that there are indeed three locations existing separately in which the divine history unfolds, Hegel is clear that these three locales are, in fact, overlapping moments or ‘forms’ of the divine history. As will become clearer in this chapter, the division between outside the world, the world, and the inner place is one which has more to do with relationality rather than with a spatial or temporal difference.\(^{84}\) In other words, we will see that the more outside of God the world is, the more in God it is; the more God is in himself, the more he is outside of himself; and that the inner place belongs to both God and world.

**The Generosity of Spirit’s Self-Determination**

In speaking of the Trinity in the Lectures of 1824, Hegel states that, “‘God is love’ is an expression very much to the point: here God is present to sensation; as ‘love’ he is a person, and the relationship is such that the consciousness of the One is to be had only in the consciousness

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\(^{82}\) Hodgson for his part maintains a more theistic interpretation of Hegel’s holistic Trinity whereas O’Regan affirms that Hegel’s Trinitarianism conforms to a “narrative dialectical panentheism.” See: Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 265-273; O’Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, 297-298. Nevertheless, for both, Hegelian ontotheology is never atheistic.

\(^{83}\) *LPR* 3, 1824, E187 G121.

\(^{84}\) There are nevertheless three forms of temporality Hegel associates with the locales of divine history. But one should reject conceiving of the divine history according to a linear progression of past, present, and future. For Hegel, the future is present even if this is not yet made explicit to us. The past corresponds to the historical presence of God and the notion that God exists outside of finitude is expressed in his atemporality.
of the other.” In the Lectures of 1827, Hegel reaffirms this point by noting early on in his exposition of the idea of God in and for itself that “the Holy Spirit is eternal love.” The reason Hegel employs the expression ‘God is love’ in order to articulate the character or movement of the abstract notion of God is so that he might highlight the necessary moment of self-differentiation contained in God as well as the subsequent return of God to himself. In other words, it is through the loving exchange or the loving relation that God immerses himself into other-being so that he can ‘win back’ his personality as concrete. This is the logic of the development of self (of the subject). Thus, the expression ‘God is love’ is meant to encapsulate the entire eternal movement of spirit by demonstrating that spirit’s activity is bound up with the special kind of reconciliation achieved within the loving exchange.

I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other. I am satisfied and have peace with myself only in this other – and I am only because I have peace with myself; if I did not have it, then I would be a contradiction that falls to pieces. This other, because it likewise exists outside itself, has its self-consciousness only in me, and both the other and

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85 LPR 3, 1824, E193 G126, emphasis added.
86 LPR 3, 1827, E276 G201. It should be noted here that the use of the term ‘holy’ with respect to Spirit is, according to O’Regan, intentional. While Hegel makes clear that he has no use for the more mythologized figures of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he nevertheless employs the use of the term ‘holy’ to indicate fullness and inclusivity. O’Regan remarks that, “holy as evoking fullness implies the ‘immanent Trinity’ as the really real, as divine self-consciousness enriched by finite consciousness, as divine goodness made determinate by agon with evil, and as divine love made concrete by exposure to and sharing in the pain and suffering of the other, i.e., the created sphere.” O’Regan, Heterodox Hegel, 294-295. Thus, the notion of the Holy Spirit suggests that Hegel has in mind here the Trinity understood from the standpoint of its own completion, i.e. its self-differentiation and subsequent return to self or, in more Christian terms, the doctrine of kenosis which includes the death and resurrection of Christ. Some commentators have remarked that the use of the adjective holy therefore denotes a negative moment in the theology of the immanent Trinity insofar as it suggests that the Trinity in itself is not logically complete without its descent into finitude. However, such a reading strays from the more holistic reading of the Trinity which argues that the divine and economic histories of the Trinity are in fact one unitary movement rather than two separate events, i.e. the Trinity is eternally logically complete, only its existential development requires involvement in finitude. In other words, it maintains the idea that the infinite and finite realms remain separate even if only conceptually while, for Hegel, this cannot be the case. This also confirms the view that genuine transcendence is achieved upon the activity of spirit in finitude; from the standpoint of orthodox Christian theism, divine kenosis is an integral aspect of the existential development of God; O’Regan sees Hegel as taking this doctrine to its conclusion: transcendence is confirmed upon the completion of divine kenosis.
87 LPR 3, 1824, E 194 G127.
88 The concept of the loving exchange will be important not only with respect to the activity of spirit in itself but equally with the activity of the community upon the transfiguration of God into spirit.
I am only this consciousness of being-outside-ourselves and of our identity; we are only this intuition, feeling, and knowledge of our unity. This is love, and without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of distinction, one speaks emptily of it. This is the simple eternal idea.\textsuperscript{89}

What Hegel articulates here is precisely the notion of forgiveness I have already referenced in the introduction: forgiveness is immersion into other-being, the giving of oneself over completely to the other.\textsuperscript{90} For this reason, forgiveness is an act of freedom: “I am the subject, I am free, I am a person for myself, and outside me there is a world. Precisely because I am free, I freely let that other go from me too, the other that is ‘out there’ and remains so” (“Ich bin das Subjekt, ich bin frei, ich bin Person für mich, und außer mir ist ein Welt. Eben da ich frei bin, so entlasse ich das Andere frei aus mir, welches drüben ist und so bleibt”).\textsuperscript{91} Hegel characterizes individual freedom in and through the activity of release; in other words, it is the release of the other as free and independent that marks the condition of personhood. And, because he characterizes personhood through the activity of the free release of the other, Hegel affirms the personhood of God (the divine idea). He is explicit on this point:

But in any case, as we [noted] earlier, the divine idea is not just this contradiction but also the resolution of it – a resolution in the sense not that the contradiction is not [present] but rather it is to be overcome. Personality (\textit{Persönlichkeit}) or freedom is truly [present] precisely in its infinite being-for-self; its very concept is thus the determination of identity-with-self and of universality. Speculatively understood, this [is] self-emptying precisely at the highest level; this eternal movement [is] its concept.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{LPR} 3, 1827, E276 G201-202.
\textsuperscript{90} In more mystical terms, \textit{ecstasis}.
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{LPR} 3, 1824, E177 G112; G.W.F. Hegel, \textit{Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion}, 3 (Hamburg: Meiner-Verlag, 1984), 112.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{LPR} 3, Ms., E83 G20-21.
The concept of release, therefore, is equally an act of love insofar as Hegel defines spirit as eternal love and the divine idea as that which releases other-being as free and independent. In other words, the divine idea has personality precisely because its activity lies in the release of other-being. This act, which is forgiveness (immersion into other-being) is love, i.e. the loving exchange whereby I give myself over to the other such that my personhood is affirmed (actualized, made concrete). Contra Milbank, this loving exchange which guarantees the freedom and personhood of the divine idea is, properly speaking, agapeic. When Hegel speaks of it as ‘self-emptying’ he appeals to the Christian doctrine of kenosis which is founded upon the love of God for the other. Houlgate adds to this, noting: “Hegel never subordinates God – or reason – to any alien necessity. Divine activity, he says, is nothing but ‘a play of love with itself,’ and when he talks of the way the presence of the divine spirit in us causes us to be ‘reborn,’ he insists that this stems from ‘divine free Grace, for everything divine is free, it is not fate, not destiny.’”93

Thus, while it is true that in Hegel’s conception of God there is necessity insofar as spirit must develop (actualize) itself, this is not the same as saying that the only kind of love spirit can enact is erotic; although creation is necessary to the actualization of spirit, it is nevertheless founded in the freedom of the divine idea, in the grace of God.

Thus far, we have been speaking principally of the Trinity in se, i.e. of the generosity of spirit as articulated within the divine idea. However, we can also consider the agapeic character of God’s love from the standpoint of the Trinity’s economic activity. Hegel’s conception of the creation of the world discloses something akin to a Christian doctrine of kenosis, as well as a strong commitment to the internal necessity of spirit’s self-revelation. We read, “It is the essence of God as spirit to be for an other, i.e., to reveal himself. He does not create the world once and

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for all, but is the eternal creator, the eternal act of self-revelation. This *actus* is what he is; this is his concept, his definition.⁹⁴ I have already indicated in the previous section that Hegel’s account of the activity of spirit with respect to creation involves the positing of *two* ‘Sons,’ i.e. at the level of the ontological Trinity, the self-othering of God – his externalization; at the economic level, the world as such. The notion that ‘God as spirit is to be for an other’ suggests that Hegel is not speaking of God at the level of the divine, i.e. insofar as God is the divine idea, but is speaking of God as he acts within finitude.⁹⁵ It is precisely in this being-for-other of spirit that we uncover what, in Hegel, is a salvific account of spirit. The being-for-other of spirit signifies revelation, i.e. the revelation of God, of truth.

According to Hegel, the creation of the world, i.e. of other-being, signifies that other-being does not have the character of truth. More simply, since Hegel identifies God as universal truth, that which is genuinely other from God necessarily has the character of untruth. “Looked at from this standpoint, that [first] other is not the Son but rather the external world, the finite world, which is outside the truth – the world of finitude, where the other has the form of being, and yet by its nature is only the ἕτερον, the determinate, what is distinct, limited, negative.”⁹⁶ The view that the created world initially subsists in a condition of untruth insofar as it is ‘other’ (ἕτερον) to God corresponds to Hegel’s reformulation of the Christian doctrine of original sin, and, by extension, into his redescription of the narrative of salvation.

⁹⁴ *LPR* 3, 1824, E170 G 105.

⁹⁵ There is no question that it is extremely difficult to speak of these two parallel instantiations of God without giving the appearance that they are distinct, but we must bear in mind that although the divine idea refers to the immanent Trinity and spirit refers to the economic Trinity, they are in fact one and the same. I separate them here to highlight the way in which spirit’s activity is not only agapeic at the ‘divine’ level, but also at the economic level such that the world enters into a different kind of relation with God. It is not the relation that the ‘Son’ (the second mode of the immanent Trinity shares with God – this is only a relationship of externalization: the Son is not truly ‘other’ to God); rather, it is a relation between genuine other-being and God insofar as the world, as the ‘second’ Son is truly other to God. See: *LPR* 3, 1827, E292 G217.

⁹⁶ *LPR* 3, 1827, E293 G218.
We will examine Hegel’s exposition of alienation (original sin, the doctrine of evil) in greater detail in chapter two; however, I will briefly highlight some of the most important aspects of this narrative here. Because the world is created as ‘other’ to God it is characterized as negative, i.e. it is, as Hegel states, what it ought not be: “natürlicher Mensch betrachten al sein solcher, der ist, wie er nicht sein soll.” At the same time, Hegel is clear that the other, i.e. finitude, the created world, humankind as such, has genuine being, which it determines for itself. Unlike the second moment of the ontological Trinity (the Son) which is only other to God insofar as it is the movement of the externalization of the triune God, the world is other as an “actual entity.” Consequently, it is born out of paradox, for it has genuine being and simultaneously is, immediately, what it ought not to be. Given finitude’s structure, then, something needs to push other-being toward what it ought to be, i.e. toward truth (God). According to Hegel’s account – and this is the element of necessity most orthodox Christian theists find problematic – the catalyst which propels finitude toward its truthful (spiritual) state is evil (alienation).

Hegel’s account of evil, as has been pointed out by several commentators, is less well-developed than what we find in the works of other German idealists such as Kant or Schelling. Evil, for Hegel, is virtually synonymous with alienation, i.e. inhabiting a state of untruth. This is not an atheistic view, nor is it particularly unorthodox for the condition of sinfulness at its core never concerns the immorality of a particular action but always the fact that it indicates an intentional rejection of God/truth. This is why morality is not the central principle of Christian faith but is instead a consequence of the individual’s orientation toward God. At the same time, for Hegel, alienation carries with it a double movement: on the one hand, intentional evil (the intentional rejection of truth), which Hodgson refers to as a spiritual evil, drives humankind...
further into its condition of untruthfulness, into its alienation. On the other hand, it is equally the condition which grants to humankind the recognition that it is what it ought not be, i.e. that humanity is *implicitly* good. Hence, there exists a contradiction within humankind, a division within the self which states on the one side that humanity is by nature evil and on the other side that humanity is by nature good.\(^{100}\)

It is this contradiction, this split within the human being, that propels the human being toward determining himself as either good or evil, i.e. toward a reinforcement of his alienated condition or toward an elevation out of his natural state toward a spiritual state. It is, according to Hegel, this state of *anguish*, i.e. the unhappy recognition that humanity resides within contradiction, which posits the need for spirit. Spirit, according to Hegelian dialectical logic, is always the reconciliation of difference. At the level of the ontological Trinity, we see that spirit is the love shared between the first two modes (Father and Son); at the economic level, spirit is the reconciliatory movement which resolves the apparent contradiction between truth and untruth, between the infinite and the finite, between God and world. However, Hegel is clear that while humankind in its condition of separation realizes the need for spirit, i.e. for reconciliation, spirit appears to human beings “in accordance with their essence, their freedom and subjectivity.”\(^{101}\) Spirit does not present itself to humankind as something alien, but as something fundamentally belonging to it; this is the entire point of reconciliation. Reconciliation reveals a primary unity with God, i.e. it makes the implicit truth of humankind – that it shares in the essence of spirit – explicit.

The agapeic character of God, therefore, is posited concretely as the appearance of spirit in the flesh. To be sure, we must maintain that for Hegel the motivation behind the incarnate

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\(^{100}\) *LPR* 3, 1827, E297-298 G221-223; E305, 229.

\(^{101}\) *LPR* 3, 1827, E314 G239.
appearance of spirit (Christ) is always first and foremost the development of spirit: Hegel’s account privileges a theogenetic theodicy, to use O’Regan’s term.102 This is precisely why critics such as Desmond and Milbank claim that spirit is fundamentally erotic. At the same time, however, we must pay attention to the fact that this vision perpetuates a one-sided dualism Hegel believes he has managed to efface. The incarnation presence of spirit reveals a unity implicitly contained within the divine and the non-divine. To say, then, that it is only spirit which develops itself in finitude relegates the finite to an irrelevance: finitude is conceived merely as a locale of the development of spirit, i.e. the playground in which spirit engages in a play of self-relations. This is clearly not the case for Hegel insofar as the movement of spirit in finitude also signals the transfiguration of the finite world. Certainly, according to a narrow orthodox reading, Hegel does not conform to the traditional view that God is fundamentally altruistic in the sense that he sends his Son into the world so that it might be saved; this kind of narrative preserves a naïve and romanticized understanding of spirit’s activity. Yet, Hegel’s rejection of this narrative does not thereby eliminate the possibility of uncovering a form of agapeic love in spirit. Houlgate affirms precisely this point when he states, “This fact that God (reason) is to one degree or another at work within us, whatever we do and whether or not we wish him (it) to be, is what enables Hegel to agree with Luther that God’s grace and love for us are unconditional.”103 This passage clearly indicates the unity between spirit and world on the side of finitude; however, we can push this further by noting that the unity exists also on the other side, i.e. on the side of the infinite. In other words, if we maintain only that spirit works within us in finitude, we lose something of Hegel’s formulation of mutual immanence. It is not just that spirit works within finitude, understood as the site of alienation, but that in inhabiting the world, spirit effects the

103 Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 269.
transfiguration of the world such that it remains distinct from God yet is no longer alienated from God, i.e. the reconciliation between the divine and the non-divine is achieved.

In Hegel’s 1827 lectures, we read a passage which has been sorely underemphasized in secondary literature:

Since what is at issue is the consciousness of absolute reconciliation, we are here in the presence of a new consciousness of humanity, or a new religion. Through it a new world is constituted, a new actuality, a different world-condition, because [humanity’s] outward determinate being, [its] natural existence, now has religion as its substantiality.104

Indem es um das Bewußstein der absoluten Versöhnung zu tun ist, ist hier ein neues Bewußstein der Menschen, eine neue Religion vorhanden. Dadurch ist bedingt eine neue Welt, eine neue Wirklichkeit, ein anderer Weltzustand; denn das äußere Dasein, die natürliche Existenz hat zu ihrer Substantialität die Religion.105

It is by virtue of the intrinsic unity of divine and non-divine, of world and God that spirit acts upon humankind so that it might continuously lead humankind toward truth, toward God. However, this cannot be understood only as spirit acting upon finitude as though this were still the alien other; instead, spirit acts within a transfigured world where consciousness of God is always consciousness of the unity with God rather than the consciousness of alienation from God. Humankind, therefore, undergoes some form of salvation in Hegel’s theodicy, albeit a revised and perhaps not entirely orthodox version. This is why the development of spirit cannot be thought of exclusively as a theogenetic theodicy, as O’Regan posits along with Desmond and Milbank, but must be seen also as preserving within it a theodicy of the more classical type, one which does not suggest that the transfiguration of the world is merely epiphenomenal but which respects the ‘essence, freedom and subjectivity’ of the radically other.

104 LPR 3, 1827, E317 G241.
105 VPR, 241.
Love equalizes all things, [but not] in the sense [that] people nowadays want to love and live in love, [implying] that others ought to give themselves up to the same commonality – [which is] the most spiritless [of conditions]…Only spirit itself, which has grasped and envisaged the truth, absolute objectivity, provides the supreme independence.\textsuperscript{106}

\textit{Mystical Elements of Speculative Knowledge}

We arrive now at what is for us the final major concept at work in Hegelian ontotheology, viz. Hegel’s intriguing description of speculative knowledge as \textit{mystical}. “The Trinity is called the \textit{mystery} of God; its content is mystical, i.e., speculative. But what is for reason is not a secret (\textit{Die Dreieinigkeit heißt das Mysterium Gottes, der Inhalt ist mystisch, d.h, spekulativ. Was für die Vernunft ist, ist kein Geheimnis}).”\textsuperscript{107} The appeal to mysticism or mystical knowledge here is important for two reasons: first, it supports the argument that has been advanced by a variety of commentators that Hegel not only embraces major aspects of Christian mysticism in his ontotheology, but actually endorses a species of divine-human communion which is specifically indebted to the Christian mystical tradition.\textsuperscript{108} Second, a more detailed discussion of Hegel’s link to mysticism is necessary in order to shed light on important aspects of Milbank’s and Žižek’s debate, for both appeal to the mystical underpinnings in Hegel’s ontotheology in order to demonstrate his atheistic inclination. For Žižek, it is precisely in the similarity between Eckhart and Hegel that we uncover a theory of a-theistic mutual

\textsuperscript{106} LPR 3, Ms., E135-136 G71, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{107} LPR 3, 1824, E192 G125; VPR, 125.
\textsuperscript{108} The two major figures generally brought up in discussions surrounding Hegel’s mysticism are Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme. Eckhart seems to occupy a smaller role in Hegel’s theology than Boehme, especially given that Hegel explicitly mentions Boehme’s formulation of the Trinity and the role of evil in the world in the 1821 manuscript as well as in the 1824 and 1827 lectures. See: LPR 3, Ms., E99 G36; LPR 3, 1824, E200 G133; LPR 3, 1827, E289 G214; E293 G218. However, Hegel’s formulation of the particular type of knowledge one gains in and through the activity of spirit leans more toward Eckhart’s own vision of the divine-human communion. Here, I devote my attention to the correlation between Eckhart and Hegel since this constitutes a significant aspect of the debate between Milbank and Žižek.
immanence which he takes as a precursor to his materialist theology. Milbank, undoubtedly horrified by this interpretation of Eckhart, presents what he argues are the paradoxical elements in Eckhart’s thought in order to show exactly where he and Hegel part ways so that Eckhart’s commitment to Christian theism remains untainted while Hegel’s ontotheology is exposed as a Gnostic-Boehmian (expressly Protestant/atheist) metaphysics. Our aim, then, is to show exactly where Eckhartian apophatic theology and Hegelian ontotheology overlap, for there is no question that there are significant concepts at work in Hegel’s *LPR* which correspond to Eckhart’s thought. While a thorough exegesis is impossible here, I will introduce at least the basic parallels we can draw between Eckhart and Hegel.

First, we find that both Eckhart and Hegel emphasize knowledge of the divine as both immediate and as fundamentally rational. This is why Hegel states that the Trinity is no secret to reason. On the side of logic, the Trinity is mystical insofar as its dialectical unfolding conforms to thinking. In other words, the logical structure of the ontological Trinity takes the form of a syllogistic development from universality to particularity to singularity; in this sense, the Trinity is ‘given’ to reason. Hegel remarks,

‘What is revealed?’ the answer is that what God reveals is this infinite form that we have called subjectivity; i.e., it is the act of determining or positing distinctions, of positing content. What God reveals in this way is that he *is* manifestation, i.e., the process of constituting these distinctions within himself…The content that becomes manifest [*offenbar*] is what is revealed [*geoffenbart*], namely, that God is for an *other* but [also] eternally for *himself*.

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109 For Milbank, the theism/atheism debate is in fact subordinate to the more fundamental division between Catholic and Protestant metanarratives. Thus, in his view, the debate is structured as Catholicism (theism) versus Protestantism (atheism) which suggests that Protestantism at least implicitly contains within it an atheistic tendency insofar as it rejects what it perceives as a fetishization of God in the Catholic tradition. See: Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 114.

110 *LPR* 3, 1824, E170-171 G106.
Thus, already at the outset, Hegel makes it clear that God (spirit) is immediately revealed to thinking consciousness insofar as its logical structure conforms to the logical structure of consciousness. Subjectivity, which takes the form of positing and reconciling distinctions, is nothing more than a direct reflection of the activity of spirit. This is what Hegel means when he refers to the mystical. Citing the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Williams emphasizes the following passage, “When it is regarded as synonymous with the speculative, the mystical is the concrete unity of determinations that count as true for the understanding only in their separation and opposition… Thus, everything rational can equally be called ‘mystical.’”\(^\text{111}\) It is for this reason that the unity between the divine and the non-divine can be posited: humankind rationally knows itself as sharing in the divine.

Thus, Hegel does not speak of the knowledge of God as something external or as something mysterious, nor, however, does he refer to it solely as a purely logical self-knowledge wherein my knowledge of the structure of consciousness refers to the structure of spirit; it is, in addition, a ‘self-feeling’ which, paradoxically, extends beyond myself and into the universal. “In this consciousness [of the divine-human unity] humanity knows [the divine idea,] the universal, and [knows] itself to be determined for the universal, i.e., elevated above all locality, nationality, condition, life-situation, etc.”\(^\text{112}\) This is the *unio mystica*: the knowledge that the presence of God is internal to the human being not as something alien to the individual, but as something in which she participates. There is no question that the emphasis here on the internalization of spirit can be understood according to a specifically Lutheran pneumatology; however, Eckhart’s formulation of what I refer to as double ecstasis bears a marked similarity to this account as well. In addition, while Protestantism emphasizes a spiritual relationship with God, we see in the mysticism of


\(^\text{112}\) *LPR 3*, Ms., E109 G45.
Meister Eckhart that the relationship between the human and the divine is grounded in the intellect which obtains priority over the will and the understanding. We read, “Intellect penetrates right up into the essence without heeding goodness or power or wisdom, or whatever is accidental. It does not care what is added to God, it takes Him in Himself, sinks into the essence and takes God as He is pure essence.”

What Eckhart describes here is, in my view, a version of mystical ecstasis with the important qualification that for him it is not a sensory experience, but a rational, living knowledge of God. Traditionally, the mystical experience of ecstasy signifies the experience of inhabiting God’s grace, or more radically, inhabiting God’s being. This, however, is a one-sided view of ecstasis which ignores the reciprocity of spirit. The individual rises up out of herself in order to enter into God’s being (ekstasis), but put like this, the concept indicates something like a strict separation between the individual and God such that God remains transcendent (non-relational) rather than entering into a mutually immanent relationship. In other words, reciprocity is nowhere to be found. We maintain instead a vision of the subservient human being who is granted an audience with the sovereign on what appears to be a mere whim. Eckhart’s concept of ecstasis, however, points in a more developed direction: ecstasis is never solely an outward movement of the non-divine toward the divine (the representational image of which is the ‘elevation’ or ‘ascension’ of the finite toward the infinite); instead, it fundamentally involves the enstatic movement of God so that the relation is not one-sided but instead reveals genuine participation.

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113 Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 31, 188.
114 This is why Bernard McGinn refers to Eckhart as a ‘speculative’ mystic. See: Eckhart, Mystical Works, 17.
115 To be sure, the idea of participation between the human and the divine is Eckhart is tinged with a strong commitment to shared identity such that there is, at times, the barest distinction between God and man. It is precisely for this reason Eckhart’s works have been considered suspect in Christian theological history.
Eckhart states, “St. John says, ‘God is love, and whoever dwells in love, is in God and God is in him’ (1 John 4:16). He speaks very truly: for if God were in me and I were not in God, or if I were in God and God were not in me, there would be two. But if God is in me and I am in God, then I am not meaner and God is not higher.”\textsuperscript{116} Eckhart clearly rejects the standard view that the divine and the non-divine subsist in a relationship of asymmetrical value. In addition, we see that Eckhart avoids reifying any kind of dualism between the divine and the non-divine for doing so would jeopardize the simple unity of God: God is the absolute simple One. Already, we can see why certain commentators have been enthusiastic in maintaining a connection between Eckhart and Hegel: the view that the non-divine and the divine share an essential identity in Eckhart’s theology is certainly suggestive when compared to Hegelian ontotheology. In addition, the concept of double ecstasis which in Eckhart involves a movement both on the part of the divine and on the part of the non-divine mirrors Hegel’s account of God’s transfiguration into spirit and the community’s transfiguration into the spiritual state (the new actuality). Hegel’s account, read according to the concept of double ecstasis, would amount to the following: God ‘descends’ into the world, into the realm of appearance (spirit); at the same time, the community ‘elevates’ itself out of the finite (what ought not to be, i.e. the natural state) into the spiritual state (the kingdom of heaven, i.e. the concrete presence of spirit). Thus, spirit inhabits humankind as humankind inhabits spirit; this is the pure simple unity of spirit.

Another significant concept at work in Eckhart of which we find traces in Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative is that of divine-human love. For Hegel, we see that upon the establishment of the spiritual community, a new kind of love emerges; it is not

\textsuperscript{116}Eckhart, \textit{Mystical Works}, S. 12, 101.
romantic love or sexual love, nor even the kind of love we encounter in friendship, but is instead an *anguished* love.\textsuperscript{117}

For love [consists] in giving up one’s personality, all that is one’s own, etc. [It is] a self-conscious activity, the supreme surrender [of oneself] in the other, even in this most extrinsic other-being of death, the death of the absolute representative of the limits of life. The death of Christ [is] the vision of this love itself – not [love merely] on the behalf of others, but precisely *divinity* in this universal identity with being-other, death. This monstrous unification of these absolute extremes is love itself – [this is] the speculative intuition.\textsuperscript{118}

--denn Liebe im Aufgeben seiner Persönlichkeit, Eigentums usf. Selbstbewußtsein Tun – im Anderen höchstes Aufgeben – eben in diesem äußersten Anderssein des Todes, des absoluten Repräsentanten der Schranke des Lebens. Tod Christi Anschauung dieser Liebe selbst – nicht für, um Anderes –, sondern Göttlichkeit eben in dieser allgemeinen Identität mit dem Anderssein, Tod; die ungeheure Vereinigung dieser absoluten Extreme ist die Liebe selbst – spekulativ Anschauung.\textsuperscript{119}

The kind of love Hegel describes here is one best associated with the concept of *surrender* or *release*, which closely resembles Eckhart’s formulation of un-attachment or self-abandonment (*abgeschiedenheit*). The principle aspect of this higher concept of love, for both Eckhart and Hegel, is that it suggests a distancing or ‘letting go’ of the representational understanding, particular subjectivity, superficial values, and materiality that is usually embraced within finitude. To be clear, this is not an overtly ascetic practice as such, for it does not endorse a blind detachment from earthly things. "*This* cannot be learned by running away, by fleeing into the desert away from outward things; a man must learn to acquire an inward desert, wherever and

\textsuperscript{117} LPR 3, Ms., E131 G67; E139 G75. 
\textsuperscript{118} LPR 3, Ms., E125 G60. 
\textsuperscript{119} VPR3, 60. The use of the term ‘monstrous’ (die ungeheure) should be noted here, for as we shall see in chapter three, Žižek greatly inflates the significance of this word. 

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with whomever he is.”¹²⁰ Instead, it posits the view that in order to obtain genuine knowledge of God (in order to enter into a genuine loving relation with God) one must empty oneself of finitude; in other words, the human being also undergoes a self-divestment as spirit (further establishing the shared identity of the finite and the divine). Williams remarks on this saying, “Kenosis expresses not only the self-divestment of the divine (assuming human form), but also the self-emptying of the human in the form of the servant. Hegel captures both senses of kenosis with his qualification of singularity as being-for-others.”¹²¹ Understood according to a more mystical framework, the self-abnegation of particular subjectivity constitutes a kind of ‘death’ to finitude. In belonging to the spiritual community which resides in spirit, the individual recognizes herself as belonging to the universal, to the infinite. But, this implies a transition from finite particularity to infinite universality which involves, “endlessly divesting itself of its particularity and self-possession and having its infinite value only in the love that is contained in infinite anguish and comes from it.”¹²² The negation of finitude, of negativity (the ἕτερος) is, as Hegel remarks upon the death of God, the death of death.¹²³ But, it is not only God which undergoes this death; this is the special significance of the Christian narrative understood according against a mystical background. In overcoming death, finitude is genuinely transfigured such that a new actuality is posited, but the transition from empirical consciousness to spiritual consciousness is not a one-sided work; instead, the human community, too, must undergo a death to the natural, i.e. to what ought not be. In the words of Eckhart: “How should a man be who is to see God? He must be dead…Now St. Gregory says he is dead who is dead to the world.”¹²⁴

¹²¹ Williams, Hegel on the Proofs and Personhood of God, 275.
¹²² LPR 3, Ms., E137 G73.
¹²³ LPR 3, 1827, E326 G 250.
¹²⁴ Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 30, 184.
It is through this death, which can be described as a death to the natural, i.e. to the condition of untruthfulness/alienation, that the human being undergoes a transition into divine love, i.e. spiritual life, to unity with God (spirit). What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that Eckhart identifies this state – the harmony of divine and non-divine – as grace. “An indwelling, an attachment and a union with God, – that is grace, and God is ‘with’ that.”¹²⁵ The reason this is important is because it presents a possible response to Milbank’s claim that Hegel’s ontotheology does not allow for something like the concept of grace because spirit is bound to a model of creation as creatio ex Deo rather than the orthodox creatio ex nihilo.¹²⁶ However, if we admit that Hegel’s speculative redescriptions of the Christian narrative leads toward a theistic theory of mutual immanence, understood according to the movement of double ecstasis I have outlined above, then there is room to say that the potential for ‘grace,’ at least conceived through an Eckhartian lens, is present.

Returning to the notion that divine love is obtained in and through the rejection of particularity, we find suggestive passages in Hegel’s LPR which demonstrate some similarity between the self-divestment of God and Eckhart’s vision of un-attachment. We read, “This unity in the infinite love that arises from infinite anguish is, accordingly, in no way a sensible, worldly linkage, not dependent upon the particularity and naturalness that are still left over and retain validity, but rather a unity simply in the Spirit.”¹²⁷ The language here is evocative, for it expresses a species of love that arises out of the infinite anguish we encounter upon the death of God and which is released from the particularity of the world. It corresponds to some degree with Eckhart’s imperative that one must divest oneself of all attachments, including even the concept of God himself. “Therefore we beg God to rid us of God so that we may grasp and

¹²⁵ Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 29, 181.
¹²⁷ LPR 3, Ms., E139-140 G75.
eternally enjoy the truth where the highest angel and the fly and the mind are equal.”¹²⁸ Both Hegel and Eckhart come together with respect to the idea that the ultimate unity between the divine and the non-divine is a consequence of the paradoxical transition from finitude to eternality.

Contra those who claim this transition away from finitude constitutes a Gnostic turn in Hegelian ontotheology, we see that, properly understood, the rejection of finitude is only the affirmation of the truth of finitude, i.e. the finite is a vanishing moment of the infinite. “This is the vocation of humanity as human in general, to enter wholly into the consciousness of human finitude – the ray of eternal life that shines clearly for it within the finite.”¹²⁹ The crucial point here is that, against the claim which states that dialectical logic cannot maintain paradox, the nature of this transition is one which maintains the integrity of a strict unity. To be sure, the contradiction between the finite and the infinite or between the divine and the non-divine is resolved, but this reconciliation is never one which collapses into self-sameness. Rather, the dialectical unfolding of spirit entails parallel reflective movements which indicate not only relationality but also reciprocity. This is why neither Hegel nor Eckhart fall into pantheism.

Eckhart’s theology makes this abundantly clear when he writes, “God is in all things. The more He is in things, the more He is out of things: the more in, the more out, and the more out, the more in. I have often said, God is creating the whole world now this instant.”¹³⁰ The notion that God is in all things, for Eckhart as for Hegel, always specifies movement; it is never indicative of a static inhabitation on the part of God. In the LPR, we read, “His creative role is not an actus

¹²⁸ Schürmann, Wandering Joy, 212.
¹²⁹ LPR 3, Ms., E110 G46.
¹³⁰ Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 18, 133.
that happened once; [rather] what takes place in the idea is an *eternal* moment, an eternal determination of the idea.”

A further examination of the ‘instant’ is useful here, for both Eckhart and Hegel employ the concept of ‘instant’ in a way which gestures toward eternity. Schürmann notes that, “Eckhart distinguishes between continued time or duration and discontinued time or the instant,” the former corresponding to the individual prior to her self-divestment while the latter corresponds to the individual upon her self-abnegation. In other words, duration signifies succession, i.e. time understood according to past, present, and future. This concept of temporality belongs to the realm of finitude which by its very definition has this nature. The instant, by contrast, suggests something fleeting, a ‘vanishing moment,’ which is subsumed under the infinite. For Hegel, the instant always corresponds to the authentic nature of finitude: “For the world, to be means to have being only for an instant (*Augenblick*), so to speak, but also to sublate this its separation of estrangement from God.” The being of the world is understood according to its fleetingness, which includes a negation of its temporality and an affirmation of its eternality. Speculative reason, however, understands that this fleetingness, this vanishing moment, is not related to a passing away from which we never return, but rather to the “fullness’ of the instant, i.e. eternity. What the transfiguration of the world into the spiritual state accomplishes, then, is not only the recognition that spirit now resides in the world, but that the world now inhabits eternity, not as a future event, but as its present condition.

Hegel is clear that this transition is genuine: it should not be taken to mean that the world has always been eternal and only comes to the realization of its eternality upon the transfiguration of the community. It is emphatically not the kind of spiritual awakening we

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131 *LPR* 3, 1827, E275 G200.
133 *LPR* 3, 1827, E293 G217.
encounter in the Buddhist concept of enlightenment where truth lies in acknowledging the impermanence and non-essentiality of the universe. Hegel explicitly states that this conception of finitude is too abstract and ultimately empty of content.\textsuperscript{134} Instead, the correct interpretation of this transition is one which emphasizes the actual emergence of a previously non-existent state of affairs. This is a crucial point which challenges the kind of atheism Žižek uncovers in the Hegelian account of spirit. For him, as we shall see, the transfiguration of spirit signifies only an empty return to finitude, a finitude which, ironically, maintains the degenerative transcendence of God insofar as he conceives it as the site for the static inhabitation of spirit. In other words, Žižek follows the classical representational view that spirit ‘descends’ into finitude and, in doing so, becomes entirely impotent. Spirit, according to this view, has no relation to humankind; rather than becoming more concrete it becomes less so: spirit is the belief in which we should no longer believe as opposed to the actuality we know.

Thus far, I have outlined various concepts at work in Hegel’s ontotheology which have some correspondence to Eckhart’s mysticism. To be sure, insofar as both highlight the speculative nature of mystical knowledge, the unity of the divine and human through love, and the movement of double ecstasis, we find common ground between the two. At the same time, it is equally important to emphasize that there are aspects of Hegel’s ontotheology which simply do not conform to Eckhart’s specifically Catholic theism. This is especially evident in the fact that for Hegel spirit is always the central concept of the Trinity, which is why some commentators consider Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative as explicitly pneumatological.\textsuperscript{135} By contrast, Eckhart’s theology is primarily Christological: “The Son alone is truth, not the Father or the Holy Ghost, except as they are on truth in their essence…And so

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{LPR} 3, 1827, E266 G191-192.
\textsuperscript{135} See: Alan M. Olson \textit{Hegel and the Spirit: Philosophy as Pneumatology}. 
the Son alone is truth. All that the Father has and can perform, He speaks fully in His Son.”

While the figure of Christ plays a crucial role in the self-development of spirit as well as in the development of the community, concrete spirit is always presupposed in his movement. Hegel places less emphasis on the incarnation than traditional Catholic theology which maintains incarnation as the central feature of Christian doctrine. This does not dismiss the role incarnation plays in Hegel’s ontotheology, but it does suggest that the ultimate aim of the theogenetic odyssey is never to posit the presence of Christ (as we find in the rituals of the Catholic church) but to posit the presence of spirit (a more Lutheran conclusion).

In addition, Eckhart is more ambiguous with respect to the ontological separation between the divine and the non-divine than Hegel. While Hegel provides a fair amount of support for the interpretation that the unity between the finite and the infinite is not an achieved identity (the reduction to the same) between God and world, Eckhart’s theology is less strict. For instance, in some sermons, Eckhart suggests that the soul and God are identical; in others he claims they are distinct. In some sermons, he suggests that one must become God in order to know God, a claim which is perhaps more radical than Hegel’s indebtedness to Lutheranism would allow. We also see a marked difference between Eckhart and Hegel in their respective concepts of the transcendence of God. While both can be said to be advancing a theory of mutual immanence insofar as both articulate a movement of double ecstasis, Eckhart nevertheless posits the eternal transcendence of the infinite which does not emphasize the historical (contingent) role of its development.

136 Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 27, 173. And again in Sermon 68, “The origin of the Holy Ghost is the Son. If it were not for the Son there would be no Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost cannot have his outflowing or his blossoming forth anywhere but from the Son. When the Father begets the Son, He gives him all that He has of essence and nature. In that giving the Holy Ghost gushes forth.” Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 68, 348.

137 Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 7, 74-75; S. 41, 231.
Nevertheless, both embrace the view that God’s relationality is necessary. Eckhart states, “In my [eternal] birth all things were born, and I was cause of myself as well as of things. If I had not willed it, neither I nor any things would be. And if I myself were not, God would not be either: That God is God, of this I am a cause. If I were not, God would not be God.” What is particularly interesting is that Hegel includes this passage in *LPR I* as a defense against naïve interpretations of pantheism which suggests that he wishes to articulate a version of ‘pantheism’ that acknowledges the concreteness of spirit, i.e. the ‘depth’ of religious content. Additionally, with respect to the aim of freeing the individual from her subjective particularity, Eckhart and Hegel agree. Both articulate the goal of religion as the achievement of the concrete freedom of the individual. For Eckhart, as we have seen, this occurs through self-abnegation, through an intentional orientation toward truth, i.e. toward God. For Hegel, the freedom of the individual is constituted by a similar movement: the transfiguration of the community is the actualization of the world of freedom, a world which cognizes itself not via its limitations, but rather by its participation in the infinite. Hegel remarks, “True faith as defined above presupposes the self-consciousness of the absolute freedom of spirit, the consciousness that, according to its basic determination, the human being is in and for itself free and knows itself as infinite personality.”

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138 Schürmann, *Wandering Joy*, 215. Hegel specifically quotes this passage in *LPR I*: “The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see him; my eye and his eye are one and the same. In righteousness I am weighed in God and he in me. If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would he.” *LPR I*, 1824, E347-348 G248. Nevertheless, Hegel concludes that this passage is not proper to traditional pantheism, for it remains too abstract whereas the relationship Eckhart expresses the very ‘depth’ of religious content.

139 *LPR I*, 1824, E351 n.174, G251.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to show first, that Hegel’s project is properly ontotheological with respect to the identity between philosophy and theology and his use of specifically Christian theistic concepts. By examining Hegel’s conception of the Christian Trinity both at the ontological and economic levels, we see that for Hegel the Trinity is fundamentally inclusive. This suggests that readings which privilege either the ontological Trinity in order to demonstrate a commitment to non-relationality (degenerative transcendence) or the economic Trinity in order to advance a doctrine of identity (pure immanence) are fundamentally one-sided. Indeed, they perpetuate the very dualism Hegel’s project sought to overcome. Second, I have tried to show that contra Milbank’s claim that the dialectical logic of spirit cannot admit agapeic love, Hegel’s concept of spirit is not only relational, but also generous. The very nature of spirit is to be for another which is not the other contained in the ontological Trinity (the second mode of the Trinity, the Son) but the radically other (the finite world). This is precisely the foundation of divine love which elevates humankind out of a state of infinite anguish (alienation) and into the spiritual state (unity of human and divine). It is always the infinite which first and foremost accomplishes the reconciliation between the divine and the non-divine. Certainly, because this movement is reciprocal, it requires movement on the part of the non-divine; however, it is always first posited by the divine and actualized in and through spirit. Finally, I have sought to show that Hegel’s philosophy of religion contains within it profoundly mystical elements which will support the claim in the following chapter that Hegel’s ontotheology is properly theistic. Most crucially, we see that with respect to the ultimate goal of the Christian narrative, i.e. freedom, Hegel advances the view that individual freedom is
accomplished through a species of mutual immanence which entails self-divestment, a position we also find in Eckhart. It is principally for this reason that the relation between Eckhart’s mysticism and the Hegelian logic of spirit is significant, for in articulating precisely where Eckhart and Hegel overlap in terms of their theories of mutual immanence, we encounter potential responses which resist the claim that Hegel only presents us with a ‘disguised atheism.’
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Chapter Two

Resurrecting Religion: Reinstating Theology in an Era of Ideological Despair

The debate between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek in the Monstrosity of Christ concerns, among other things, the division between, on the one hand, the view that Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative leads toward a pantheistic/atheistic conclusion via the logic of the Christian narrative and the view, on the other hand, that Hegel’s ontotheology is nihilistic/atheistic because it does not allow for a substantial transcendent God-in-itself but concludes only in immanentized spirit. The former position belongs to the ‘materialist theologian’ Slavoj Žižek while the latter perspective comes from the Catholic theologian John Milbank. Milbank and Žižek disagree on three major points: the first concerns the concept of the self and its realization; the second has to do with the role of dialectical logic itself; the third concerns the problem of transcendence and immanence. The key feature of their debate is that it centers on Hegel’s conception of the Christian Trinity and the role it plays both in the actualization of spirit from the economic or historical standpoint and within the immanent or divine sphere. In more recent years, Hegel’s conception of the Trinity has garnered interest among a wide range of philosophical thinkers, all of whom highlight the importance of understanding the Trinity in order to gain better insight into Hegel’s other philosophical works. Clearly, this work is not entirely new: many, beginning with commentators during and at the end of Hegel’s life, sought to show that Hegel was either a Christian thinker on the one hand or an

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atheist on the other.\textsuperscript{141} Even the influence of Christian mysticism on Hegel’s theology was at the center of debates regarding his work during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{142} Nevertheless, the debate between Žižek and Milbank, a humanist atheist on the one hand and an orthodox Christian theologian on the other, brings forward many of the on-going concerns in Hegelian ontotheology such as the immanentization of spirit and the nihilism ‘implicit’ in it, the possibility of establishing the personhood of God without appealing to a degenerative sense of transcendence, and the relation between his ontotheology and dialectical logic.

Among these point of interest, Žižek’s and Milbank’s debate also brings to our attention the continued importance of the Christian narrative in Hegel’s philosophical works. This is especially the case with respect to their understanding and use of the Christian Trinity both as it is conceived within the standard theistic tradition and as it is conceived by Hegel. By understanding the structure of the Christian Trinity as Hegel frames it, we are given a path through which we can begin to uncover his position within the broader philosophical and theological discussion concerning transcendence and immanence. With this said, my argument goes against both Milbank’s and Žižek’s positions (both ultimately claim that Hegel’s concept of the Trinity leads to a thoroughly atheistic vision of an immanent God); instead, following Williams, O’Regan and Hodgson, I argue that Hegel’s conception of the Trinity goes beyond the dualistic rendering of transcendence and immanence by achieving a synthesis between the two realms where the community of believers is constituted by its relation to a God who is both transcendent and immanent. Thus, Hegel’s God is not absolutely transcendent nor is he absolutely immanent; instead, Hegel’s God is characterized by transcendence \textit{and} immanence or,

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more properly, the movement of spirit is characterized by a species of *mutual immanence* which retains the divine’s claim to genuine transcendence.

Where my argument differs from the thinkers outlined above is with respect to two points: first, I maintain that Hegel’s ontotheology is properly theistic insofar as the genuine transcendence of the divine is not only preserved, but accomplished upon the transfiguration of spirit.\(^{143}\) Second, I emphasize the second moment of the transfiguration of spirit which is often left aside in contemporary secondary literature in order to show that not only is Christ transfigured into spirit, but also the community is transfigured into a new actuality. In other words, Hegel does not merely give us a traditional narrative in which spirit comes to inhabit the finite; rather, in a radical double movement, the community itself is transfigured such that it no longer inhabits finitude, but enters into a ‘new world,’ a ‘new actuality.’\(^{144}\) Hence, this chapter presents a response against the charge laid out by Milbank and Žižek that Hegel’s philosophy of religion is fundamentally atheistic and seeks to show that the double transfiguration of spirit and world implies not atheism, but rather a vision of mutual immanence which is fundamentally theistic at its core.

In order to present this response, the chapter is organized as follows: the first section provides a basic outline of Žižek’s and Milbank’s arguments for an atheistic reading of Hegel’s philosophy of religion. Included in this is the perceived conflict between a pneumatological characterization of Hegel’s divine and the appeal to personality in the development of spirit; the tension between dialectical (Protestant) logic and paradoxical (Catholic) reasoning, and the role Christianity plays in Hegel’s metaphysics. The second section concerns Žižek’s reworking of the

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\(^{143}\) As I have already noted in the introduction, I include a species of panentheism within the tradition of theism, but with the qualification that the divine remains genuinely transcendent, i.e. the infinite always extends beyond the finite. This is perhaps where my interpretation deviates from the exegetical work of commentators such as Williams, Cooper, and Hodgson. O’Regan is an exception to this for while he ultimately maintains that Hegel’s ontotheology is panentheistic he also endorses a view of transcendence which guarantees the full subjectivity of the divine.

\(^{144}\) *LPR 3*, 1827, E317 G241.
Christian theodicy such that it concludes in its own effacement. This section considers first, Žižek’s interpretation of the kenotic movement of spirit and his emphasis on Hegelian Christology; second, his emphasis on the internal lack spirit attempts to overcome; and third, his claim that the incarnate divine is a monster who reveals the absence of God. The third section, then, will examine Milbank’s arguments against both Žižek and Milbank, especially the view that both are caught up in a specifically Protestant metanarrative which can only conclude in a species of atheism/nihilism. This section will also examine Milbank’s charge that Hegelian ontotheology can only begin in the nothingness of pure being to which it inevitably returns in the moment of reconciliation.

**Žižek and Milbank: A ‘Non-Conversation’ on Hegel**

Of primary concern for Žižek and Milbank is, first, Hegel’s pneumatological characterization of the divine, which has been largely criticized for its reduction of spirit into what amounts to a merely formal process. Hegel’s concept of spirit is defined by its very activity, namely, the self-differentiation of spirit and its subsequent return to itself as something completed. What this risks is detracting from the status of personhood or self of spirit and, in consequence, of human beings insofar as they are defined by their interaction with and through spirit. Žižek, for his part, tends to applaud such an interpretation for, in his view, the self is always already merely a product of social, political, and cultural constructions which are never fixed. Thus, any substantial notion of the self is merely an illusion which conceals the stream of aggregates of which we are a part. By contrast, Milbank’s conception of the self is grounded in a more orthodox Christian narrative wherein the self is conceived as the union between God and
the individual; in other words, the self is only a ‘self’ insofar as it participates in the activity of God. We can also say that the self is the actualization of God’s love; it is constituted by the shared relation between God and world. The self must be substantial for it denotes the presence of a substantial God in a concrete way. Thus, one of the major sources of disagreement between Žižek and Milbank is the conception of the self as either something constructed in and through human activity or as something created by virtue of God’s activity. This point is especially important with respect to Žižek’s ultimate position for if the self is constructed only in and through activity and the self is identical to God (his interpretation of the conclusion of Hegelian ontotheology) then both God and self are merely the products of contingent events and any claim to substantiality (on the part of God or the self) is merely deceptive. This is why Žižek goes so far as to refer to his view as a ‘materialist theology.’

The tension between dialectical logic and paradoxical reasoning underlies a good deal of this disagreement regarding the constitution of the self. Žižek sees the dialectic as an unfolding which ultimately leads to the ‘death of God’ theology he advocates toward the end of his chapter. According to his view, the transition from the second term of the Trinity and its accompanying moments – creation, the fall, the death of Christ on the cross – to the third moment, i.e. the presence of spirit in the finite realm, completes the transfiguration of the abstract God of the beyond by resurrecting him as a shadowy presence residing only in the hearts of the community of believers. In the chapter “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” Žižek underscores the developmental or processual character of dialectical logic, emphasizing the idea that Hegel’s conception of the Trinity is constituted purely by its own process of self-differentiation which is mirrored in the finite realm. He focuses almost

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exclusively on the economic Trinity – on the unfolding of the Trinity in the world – and spends less time dealing with the immanent Trinity, except to note that its economy radically alters the ontological structure of the Trinity. Instead, Žižek’s account of Hegelian ontotheology remains thoroughly anthropocentric insofar as he stresses the death of God as the quasi-divinization of human beings. Properly speaking, this view is not in itself incorrect nor is it even unorthodox; however, Žižek fails to fulfill the movement Hegel depicts by leaving the radical transfiguration of the Trinity one-sided. More simply, Žižek argues that the death of Christ on the cross is equally the death of the God of the beyond, of the Father. But here, Žižek misses a crucial step, for while he emphasizes the resurrection of Christ as the movement toward spirit through the incarnation, he does not consider the possibility that the Father (the God of the beyond), too, is resurrected. Consequently, Žižek misses the double movement contained within the final moment of spirit: while spirit descends into the finite realm, the community is elevated into the kingdom of God, or more properly, the community is transformed into a spiritual realm in which the presence of God is made explicit.

Conversely, Milbank, following William Desmond’s argument in *Hegel’s God: A Counterfeit Double?* sees the processual character of the dialectical unfolding of spirit as an empty relationality where God’s activity is entirely self-involved and self-fulfilling.146 Desmond argues that Hegel’s God is fully erotic rather than agapeic as the Christian God must be.147 In Milbank’s view, the movement of spirit, including its actualization in finitude, betrays a

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147 Ibid., 114-116. Milbank will revise Desmond’s argument by adding that Hegel’s ontotheology is, properly speaking, ‘hyper-erotic’ and ‘hyper-agapeic’. He notes, “Desmond does not sufficiently recognize the point that Hegelian dialectics just as much reduces the univocal to equivocation. Here one should split the interpretive difference between Desmond and Žižek: in formal terms Hegel reduces all to unity, but in substantive terms he reduces all to difference. Formally, he is hypererotic, swallowing the other in desire for the same, but substantively he is hyperagapeic, finally rendering the divine as the absolute kenosis of contingent unilateral gift.” John Milbank, “The Double Glory: Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” *Monstrosity of Christ* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 146.
fundamental abstraction where God is synonymous with bare nothingness, the result of which is that finite individuals, too, do not have a genuine relationship with God but only its illusion. Thus, Milbank stresses the necessary *paradoxical* nature of Christianity; if we are to make sense of the Christian account and view God as something with content rather than as pure self-relationality, a paradoxical tension between the finite and the infinite must be upheld.\(^{148}\) It is for this reason Milbank argues against Žižek’s reading of Meister Eckhart (a paradoxical thinker), which places Eckhart in a narrative that also includes Jacob Boehme and G.K. Chesterton, and which seeks to show that Eckhart’s somewhat apophatic theology leads directly to Hegel’s God. In Milbank’s view, dialectical logic cannot maintain paradox because it ultimately resolves any contradiction that exists between terms and is unable to logically demonstrate how it opens up toward any particular direction. More clearly, dialectical reasoning cannot provide any justification for the supposed force which motivates its movement. Hence, Hegelian trinitarianism does not present us with a genuine view of Christianity but is instead a modern reformulation of Gnosticism.

There are a variety of criticisms which can be levelled against Milbank’s interpretation of Hegelian ontotheology, the first of which concerns his view that Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative is Gnostic. While it is certainly true that Hegel’s account bears elements of Gnosticism and, even more significantly, elements of Neoplatonism, this does not detract from its theistic claim.\(^{149}\) As Bernard McGinn notes in the *Foundations of Mysticism*,

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\(^{148}\) Milbank refers to paradoxical logic also as ‘analogy,’ ‘real relation,’ ‘realism’ (regarding universals), and the ‘metaxological’ (following Desmond). See: Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 112.

\(^{149}\) Milbank is not the first to accuse Hegel of Gnosticism, however, what is important, as Cyril O’Regan notes, is to understand what is meant by Gnosticism according to those who believe Hegel is following in this tradition. If Gnosticism is meant to denote a species of knowledge of God which is absolute rather than human and relative, then one could object first, that this is not indicative of historical Gnosticism but is rather a generalized view of a certain kind of religious knowledge and second, that while Hegel might advocate this kind of knowledge, he is no different than a variety of other Christian thinkers who have come before him and said much the same thing. For a more detailed analysis of precisely this point, see: O’Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, pp. 19-20.
Christian mysticism cannot be separated from Platonism and Neoplatonism and shares an especially complicated history with Gnosticism. Furthermore, if Milbank is willing to concede that Eckhart is a properly Christian thinker, as he does, and set aside the Platonic and Gnostic influences in Eckhart’s theology, it seems contradictory that he would then fault Hegel on precisely these grounds. The second problem in Milbank’s argument lies in his understanding of Hegelian dialectical reasoning. Milbank’s complaint is that dialectical logic, while supporting the pretense of movement, is in fact a static structure which can only move back and forth between its oppositional terms, but cannot generate any new movement outside of itself. Instead, only paradoxical or Catholic reasoning is able to maintain opposing terms without attempting to reconcile their differences. However, such an interpretation of the dialectic does an injustice to the dynamism underlying Hegel’s thought; as Hegel maintains throughout his works, tensions between the finite and the infinite are necessarily maintained or else the vitality of spirit is lost.

Thus, if Milbank’s critique of dialectical logic lies in the belief that dialectical thought cannot uphold tensions between terms, this is incorrect. While it is true that dialectical logic leads to the reconciliation of opposing terms, this does not mean that the negativity necessary to further the dialectical movement is absolutely overcome (a point to which Milbank himself returns). Nor does dialectical logic imply that all positivity collapses into negativity, as Milbank himself claims. Rather, and this is the crucial point in any discussion of Hegel’s ontotheology, the movement of spirit, i.e. of absolute Being, is eternal; it is constant. It is never one event which renders any further dialectical movement irrelevant or unnecessary. Consequently, tensions must

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150 Glenn Alexander Magee goes one step further than O’Regan. He argues that Hegel properly belongs in the Hermetic tradition which is often confused with Gnosticism. The crucial difference, however, is that Gnosticism does not admit of creation as belonging to God, i.e. creation is truly creation ex nihilo; Hermeticism, by contrast, holds that the created world shares in God’s being and that humankind plays a critical role in God’s own self-knowledge. See: Glenn Alexander Magee, Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001), 10.
151 LPR 3, 1827, E311 G235.
152 See: Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 139.
remain within the dialectical structure of revelation, which is precisely why Hegel is a thinker of both transcendence and immanence.

Finally, Žižek and Milbank embrace radically different conceptions of the role Christianity plays in Hegelian ontotheology. For Žižek, Hegel’s use of the Christian language and narrative indicates a deep-seated desire to invert the logic of Christianity from within, i.e. to overcome the final barrier between the finite and the infinite not by subsuming the finite under it, but rather by appealing to the negativity implicit in it. Thus, Hegel’s philosophy is rendered nihilistic: the purpose of the Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative is to demonstrate the unyielding negativity against which being eternally strives to posit itself; this is how Žižek reads Hegel’s ‘Speculative Good Friday.’ Žižek’s reading here relies on interpreting the concept of creation, according to Hegel, as the ‘Christian creatio ex nihilo, with the caveat that he identifies the nihil with God himself (a genuinely non-Christian move). He states, “The ‘nothingness’ is the nothingness of (that is) God himself, i.e., creatio ex nihilo implies that a thing appears ‘out of nowhere,’ and is not caused by an identifiable ground.” In this respect, Milbank is in complete agreement with Žižek’s interpretation of Hegelian metaphysics: insofar as the logical structure of being begins with nothingness, it cannot admit any kind of authentic claim to theism. He remarks,

In Hegel’s case, the posited originality of the nihil means that nothingness must always move against itself in order to produce something...In Hegel’s case the situation is worse than this, in that the negation of an entire given situation (as it were, leaving our entire universe) seems to generate its own destination which both is and is not one’s starting point.

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153 Žižek, Monstrosity of Christ, 42.
154 Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 142.
However, both Milbank and Žižek come to this conclusion because they construe Hegelian dialectical logic as beginning with an absolute or oukontic nothingness rather than a relative or meontic nothingness. Furthermore, Hegel’s explicitly discloses something akin to absolute plentitude when he notes that God is the “absolute, all-encompassing fulfillment” of everything that subsists in the world. Thus, the view that the dialectic of spirit begins and ends in pure nothingness is, at the very least, subject to debate. Rather than interpreting Hegel as endorsing the view that the world is created out of the absolute nothing, i.e. the void or abyss of being, we should more properly interpret him as saying that the world emerges (is created) from the movement of becoming (Werden), i.e. out of the synthesis of being and nothing, which maintains the ‘original’ nothingness of being purely as a logical limitation and not as an existential state.

**God Made in the Image of Man: On Žižek’s Reading of the Hegelian Christian Narrative**

For Žižek, Christ necessarily plays a central role in Hegel’s ontotheology, going so far as to say that it is precisely the valorization of Christ that Orthodoxy misses in its doctrinal disagreement with western Christianity. Christ, properly understood, is the ‘vanishing mediator’ between God and man, between the “substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community.” He accomplishes this mediation primarily by his death, for the death of Christ is the death of the transcendent God of the beyond, an event which overthrows the notion of God as the absolute sovereign and replaces this image with the weak, suffering God, i.e. the God who has subordinated himself to human life (which includes death).

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156 *LPR I*, Ms., E230 G140.
158 Ibid., 29.
Žižek finds this image compelling, for it denies to the concept of the post-Christian God the traditional view that God is the absolutely perfect, omnipotent, omniscient Being who remains inaccessible to his creation.\footnote{I use the term post-Christian God here because Žižek’s rendition of the Christian God upon the death of Christ is one which has effectively moved past the traditional narrative of the Christian religion.} According to Žižek’s interpretation, the God which is transfigured into spirit and which resides in the hearts of believers is no longer the Christian God in the traditional sense; instead, spirit is the post-Christian God which has undergone its own transfiguration into the universal collective which is humanity as such. There are therefore two moments of incarnation in Žižek’s account: the first is the concrete presence of Christ on earth; the second is the transfiguration of Christ into spirit – the spirit which coincides with man to the extent that all mankind is the Word made flesh.\footnote{From a classical Christian point of view, this goes too far: the danger is that this account overemphasizes the role and force of the human element in the transfiguration of God into spirit. Ultimately, Žižek’s account reduces spirit into that which is only human. The term ‘incarnation’ loses its meaning if that which is made flesh (has material existence) is no longer divine, but is only a projection of human consciousness. At the same time, it must be noted that there is an aspect of the divine contained within all humanity – this is precisely the position of Eckhart, for example. However, we can never conflate the two: God and man remain distinct despite sharing in divinity. This is the classical rendering of participation in the divine which runs counter to an egalitarian formulation of reciprocity.} The other reason Žižek favors a deipassionist reading of the Christian God is that it denies to this concept the title ‘god of the philosophers,’ the deistic vision of a depersonalized God who can only be accessed through some version of natural theology.\footnote{There are two significations of the ‘god of the philosophers,’ depending upon whether one is oriented toward a historical philosophical view or a contemporary theological view. Žižek clearly invokes the expression to mean the god of whom nothing can be known, i.e. as the first cause or the principle idea. However, John W. Cooper notes that from a theological perspective, the term ‘god of the philosophers,’ in fact refers to the God of classical Christian theism, i.e. the transcendent, immutable, eternal God. See John W. Cooper, Panentheism – The Other God of the Philosophers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 14. Ironically, Žižek’s vision of pure immanence (atheism) relies on the latter meaning of the ‘god of the philosophers,’ insofar as this is precisely the God who dies in his reinterpretation of the Christian narrative.} In short, what Žižek finds convincing in his reworking of Hegelian Christology is that the divine is not understood as something wholly transcendent (insofar as it has died), nor as something wholly impersonal as we find in ‘crude’ pantheism. Instead, the divine genuinely suffers, i.e. not only is God involved in finitude, he surrenders himself to the ultimate representative limit of finitude. “In this way,”
Žižek notes, “God is no longer a monarch who eternally dwells in his absolute transcendence – the very difference between eternal essence and its manifestation (the divine ‘economy’) should be abandoned.” Thus, Žizek appears to also favor a holistic or inclusive trinitarianism; however, as we shall see, this inclusivity is eventually compromised by Žižek’s re-appropriation of the trajectory of spirit. This is problematic from the standpoint of a theistic reading of Hegelian ontotheology, for the inclusivity of the triune structure of the divine allows it to “incorporate external relations, make them internal to itself without annihilating their exteriority vis-à-vis each other and toward God. The world remains world, not-God within God.” Hodgson, who presents a more theistic/Christian reading of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, maintains that finitude always remains ontologically distinct from God in spite of its participation in the being of the divine. While Žižek will admit that the division between the immanent and economic Trinity should be rejected, he nevertheless does not go so far as Hodgson who posits the world as not-God within God. Instead, the formulation we see arising in Žižek is expressed as, ‘world remains world, god without God.’ For Žižek, the proper meaning of incarnation is that, “one cannot become God – not because God dwells in a transcendent Beyond, but because God is dead, so that whole idea of approaching a transcendent God becomes irrelevant; the only identification is the identification with Christ.”

Eschewing more traditional representations of the Trinity where the Son sits at the right hand of God, Žižek argues instead that the incarnation is not only the birth of Christ, but much more radically, of the Son, i.e. God. “The Son was not present in God prior to Incarnation, sitting up there at his side. Incarnation is the birth of Christ, and after his death, there is neither Father

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162 Žižek, Monstrosity of Christ, 32.
164 Žižek, Monstrosity of Christ, 31.
nor Son but ‘only’ the Holy Spirit, the spiritual substance of the religious community.”¹⁶⁵ The implications of this position are the following: first, it emphasizes the processual development of the Trinity. This suggests that the Trinity is bound up with its economy in such a way that it genuinely transfigures the Trinity’s play of relations – a dynamic process which constitutes the Trinity in itself (the ontological Trinity). However, what Žižek really wants to emphasize in this transfiguration of the Trinity is that the death of God is the overcoming of negativity, of the alienation of God from his creation. In order to create the world, God must create a rupture within himself, and it is from this rupture that God returns through his death and resurrection. Thus, Žižek argues that it would be mistaken to think that only man is alienated from God; rather, there is a double kenosis where God, too, finds himself alienated from that which belongs to him, i.e. creation.

The identification of the ‘Son’ with God such that in actuality there is no God prior to the Son is certainly a deviation from classical Christian theology. In other words, Žižek advances the view that the conception of a preexistent/eternal creator figure is fundamentally flawed: God only ‘exists’ via creation; this is the contribution Hegel makes to Christian theology.¹⁶⁶ Žižek comes to this conclusion through an imaginative revision of the double kenosis where the Old Testament story of Job is brought into comparison with the New Testament narrative of Christ (God). The former provides Žižek with the representative figure of man in all his finitude, i.e. man confronted by the whimsical God of the Beyond; the latter, in contrast, is the representative figure of a God who has emptied himself of all divine content in order to become man. What Žižek presents is an inversion of the classical Christian vision of man ‘made in the image and

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 33.
¹⁶⁶ Žižek also credits Meister Eckhart with this view; Hegel takes it from Eckhart and reinterprets it according to his logic of spirit. Nevertheless, the difficulty here is that neither Eckhart nor Hegel advances this position; while they both avoid a static conception of the eternal divine, they nevertheless do not suggest that the emanation of the Son is equally the birth of God.
likeness of God’; Žižek, whose ultimate aim is to subvert the theistic view of Christianity, switches the terms so that we are left with ‘God made in the image of man.’ This is, according to Žižek, the special significance of Christ in Hegelian ontotheology.

Job expresses the alienation of humankind in full when he comes to doubt the beneficence of God. What, for Žižek, is the most remarkable aspect of the Christian narrative is that Christ (the incarnate divine) must express the same alienation of humankind in its separation from the divine. In other words, Christ must succumb to the very depths of infinite anguish if we are to take seriously the notion that Christ (God) presented himself as a human being (if divine kenosis is not merely metaphorical but actual). In the Hegelian inclusive Trinity, we find that the Son (the second term of the ontological Trinity) is never fully other to God; the second mode is merely the externalization (Entaüsserung) of the Father. Here, however, we are left with the following predicament: if Christ experiences anything less than a full alienation (externalization and estrangement) from God, then he remains God, not human. In this case, he does not embody a genuine unity of the divine and the non-divine, but remains the divine operating within the world (the transcendent God who toys with his creation from afar, but does not genuinely involve himself in it). However, Žižek emphasizes Hegel’s line that Christ is the ‘monstrous’ unification of extremes, i.e. that Christ is not merely the divine, but equally the human precisely in order to emphasize the fact that Christ must endure the human condition.\(^{167}\) Christ (God) cannot be anything less than fully human which entails, as its fundamental character, alienation from the divine. This leads Žižek to interpret Christ’s ‘Father, why have you forsaken me?’ as an expression of the fundamental alienation not only of the human from the divine, but also of the divine from itself, i.e. the alienation of Christ from himself as divine (as God). It is for this reason Žižek claims, “Christ himself commits what is for Christianity the ultimate sin: he wavers

\(^{167}\) *LPR* 3, Ms., E125 G60.
in his Faith. While, in all other religions, there are people who do not believe in God, only in Christianity does God not believe in himself.\(^{168}\) It is worth noting here that Christ’s final cry on the cross emphasizes the kenotic aspect of Christ’s death: it is the human being who utters the words while God is dying. Thus, for Žižek, the parallel between the stories of Job and Christ is clear: Christianity is grounded not in belief but rather in doubt; in other words, the hallmark of Christian belief is doubt in the existence of God. Furthermore, it is inherent to the Christian narrative for it expresses the double alienation that exists between the divine and the human and between God and himself. Christianity cannot be sure of itself because it is born out of rupture, out of the separation of God from himself. As a consequence, the only God that can be supported by such a history is the suffering God, the weak and impotent God who is powerless to alter the nature of things; in this sense, Žižek follows the deipassionist reading of Christianity: this God is not a king, but rather a servant to his own creation. For Žižek, this is precisely the force behind the Christian doctrine and the point which is so often misunderstood. God’s gift of creation, his generosity, should be understood from the standpoint of Lacanian love: “the ultimate proof that God loves us is that he ‘gives what he does not have.’ If we are to grasp this properly, we should oppose to have and to be: God doesn’t give us what he has, he gives us what he is, his very being.”\(^{169}\) However, in doing so, God emptied himself so entirely into his creation that nothing of God remains.

While Žižek’s rendering of the double kenosis raises interesting questions with respect to the Hegelian narrative of divine-human alienation, it also contains, in my view, elements which simply do not conform to Hegel’s own account of kenosis. First, Žižek’s comparison between Job and Christ is tenuous: Žižek believes that Christ’s final words on the cross – ‘Father, why

\(^{168}\) Žižek, Monstrosity of Christ, 49.

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 59.
have you forsaken me?’ – suggest a fundamental alienation common to both the human and the divine. In other words, both the human and the divine are confronted with the “utter meaninglessness of it all.”170 But, this interpretation does two things: first, Hegel is more ambiguous with respect to the nature of the incarnate God: on the one hand, he says that spirit, “is immediately present as a self-conscious Being, i.e. as an actual man (wirklicher Mensch), that the believer is immediately certain of Spirit, sees, feels, and hears this divinity.”171 However, in the LPR, Hegel further qualifies his position:

He [Christ] is born like every other human being, and as a human he has the needs of other human being; only he does not share their corruption, the passions, and the evil inclinations of the other, nor is he involved in particular worldly interests, along with which integrity and teaching may also find a place. Rather he lives only for the truth, only for its proclamation; his activity consists solely in completing the higher consciousness of humanity.172

Hegel is quite orthodox here, for what this suggests is that the incarnate divine is a human being insofar as he lives and dies within finitude but that from the standpoint of alienation he does not inhabit the human condition, at least not in full. His alienation always takes the form of externalization (Entaüsserung) whereas human alienation, for Hegel, also includes estrangement (Entfremdung). Consequently, Žižek’s emphasis on the double alienation, which is meant to highlight the specifically human alienation of the incarnate divine, does not quite correspond to Hegel’s own ambiguity with respect to the nature of Christ. That Christ is ‘a man’ is for Hegel merely a historical matter; more crucially, the actual sensible presence of Christ always signifies the unity of the human and the divine, which means a “spiritual essentiality [die geistige

170 Ibid., 57.
172 LPR 3, 1827, E316-317 G240.
Wesenheit]; in the unity of divine and human nature everything that belongs to external particularization has disappeared – the finite [itself] has disappeared.\textsuperscript{173} The movement concerns the incarnate divine as the \textit{universal} figure of man; the aspect it takes on is finitude rather than alienation.\textsuperscript{174}

Second, it misrepresents the movement of the double kenosis: Žižek claims that the Son divests himself in order to experience human alienation in full, a self-abnegation which is experienced first by humankind (represented in the figure of Job). However, we read:

Concerning Christ’s death, we have still finally to emphasize the aspect that it is God who has put death to death, since he comes out of the state of death. In this way, finitude, human nature, and humiliation are posited of Christ – as of him who is strictly God – as something \textit{alien}. It is evident that finitude is alien to him and has been taken over from an other; this other is the human beings who stand over against the divine process.\textsuperscript{175}

The double kenosis signifies God emptying himself into his creation, which includes the death of Christ so that humankind may accomplish, via spirit, its own reconciliation, not alienation. In other words, what Žižek misses is the fact that for Hegel, alienation always contains within it a double movement: on the one hand, it signifies finitude’s separation from what it \textit{ought to be}, i.e. from truth/God; on the other hand, it signifies finitude’s reconciliation with God, i.e. the always present opportunity to become what it \textit{is}. This is why evil is, loosely speaking, necessary in Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative – evil is the possibility of both an

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{LPR} 3, 1827, E212 G143.
\textsuperscript{174} To be sure, finitude and alienation go hand in hand; it is precisely having the character of finitude that alienates the finite from the infinite; however, Christ’s activity lies not in being alienated, but in embodying the unity of the divine and the non-divine. His ‘work’ is not solely concerned with expressing the anguish of humankind, but in gesturing toward the transfiguration of finitude, in positing the kingdom of heaven (spirit). Hegel states, “The subject feels the anguish of evil and of its own estrangement, which Christ has taken upon himself by putting on humanity, while at the same time \textit{destroying it} by his death.” \textit{LPR} 3, 1827, E325 G246. And, it is because Christ is the sensible presence of the unification of the divine and the human that Hegel refers to the presence of Christ as the ‘monstrous (das ungeheure) reality whose necessity we have seen.’ \textit{LPR} 3, 1824, E214 G146.
\textsuperscript{175} \textit{LPR} 3, 1827, E324 n. 199 G247, emphasis added.
intentional rejection of truth and, simultaneously, of an elevation toward truth. Thus far, this account has only presented the divine kenosis from the standpoint of the Trinity’s economic history; however, since Hegel’s trinitarianism is inclusive, this implies that the ontological Trinity is subject to the same movement, i.e. to a double kenosis.

More traditionally, the concept of the double kenosis involves the divestment of the Son from the Father at the level of divine immanence. In the Phenomenology, we read: “It is the word which, when uttered, leaves behind, externalized and emptied, him who uttered it, but which is as immediately heard, and only this hearing of its own self is the existence of the Word.” In the first place, the kenotic aspect of the Trinity indicates that when the Father speaks the word, i.e. when he externalizes himself, the Son emerges. The Son is the identical reflection of the Father, but does not have the quality of radical other-being, for as the second mode of the Trinity, he is only a manifestation of spirit’s self-relationality. In the second place, the ‘Father sends his Son to earth,’ a line which expresses the second moment of the kenotic movement. It is the unity of the human and the divine “such that immediate singularity is sublated: just as in the first sphere the seclusion of God came to an end, and his original immediacy as abstract universality, according to which he is the essence of essences, has been sublated, so here the abstraction of humanity, the immediacy of subsisting singularity, is sublated, and this is brought about through death.” The kenotic aspect of the Christological account never indicates the idea that Christ becomes human in the sense that Christ undergoes the same alienation as humankind; rather, Christ puts on human nature so that he might overcome its ultimate limit, i.e. death, but this nature nevertheless remains alien to him. Thus, if we are to speak of the alienation of the divine incarnate within Hegel’s speculative redescription, the kind of alienation Christ experiences is not alienation from

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176 PS, 465 §770.
177 LPR 3, 1827, E324 n. 199 G247.
God, but rather alienation from humankind. God suffers abandonment, yes, but not from himself; rather, he suffers the abandonment of humankind which, by virtue of being radically other, has alienated itself from him.178

Hence, Žižek’s theopassionist reading of Hegel’s God which suggests that God suffers as a human being is not quite correct. Instead, God suffers-with: suffering is a communal event wherein the incarnate divine takes on the alienation of humankind and expresses its highest point in the humiliating death of the criminal on the cross. Hegel is clear on this point: the suffering of the incarnate divine is one which deeply involves him in finitude; he takes on the defining characteristic of finitude (morality) – “In him, humanity was carried to its further point.”179 But, at the same time, this involvement in finitude does not take anything away from incarnate divine’s character as God. In other words, God remains God, even in his becoming identical to that which is fundamentally alien to him, i.e. evil (alienation). This is why Hodgson is able to state that for Hegel, the ‘world remains world, not-God within God.’

Thus, Žižek’s account of Hegel’s radical Christology is, essentially, too radical. In what follows, I would like to advance the view that Žižek’s reading of the kind of dependence Hegel posits between God and world is too unilateral, too one-sided. More simply, it jeopardizes the genuine relationality which subsists between the divine and the non-divine by removing the reciprocal character which supports the view that spirit is not only erotic but also agapeic. In other words, Žižek’s vision of the Hegelian God (spirit) is too anthropocentric; he posits a divine which has for its only goal becoming human. While there is no question this is a radical

178 In this sense, Hegel follows a fairly classical schema of the Christian narrative, one which places some of the responsibility of alienation on humankind and not solely on God. Žižek goes too far by suggesting that God feels alienated from himself in Hegel’s reworking of the Christian narrative. Hegel emphasizes repeatedly that Christ is not a human being among other human beings, but is always the unique, singular human being – the unity of the divine and the non-divine which indicates carrying the burden of human nature (death) but not having the alienation intrinsic to human nature.

179 LPR 3, 1827, E232 n. 199 G246.
reinterpretation of the Christian narrative, it is not, in my view, the kind of account Hegel himself advances or would endorse. In addition, as I have already pointed out, Žižek’s narrative overstates the kind of alienation at work in the kenotic movement within the divine sphere and reduces it to the same kind of alienation we encounter in finitude; in other words, he conflates God and world in the incarnate divine rather than upholding the notion that Christ symbolizes a genuine unity between the divine and the non-divine. The reason he does this is because he takes up the concept of alienation in a broad sense, rather than recognizing that for Hegel, there are two types of alienation at work in his ontotheology: the alienation of the human, which falls into estrangement (Entfremdung) and the alienation of the divine which only indicates externalization. Humankind is both an externalization of God (the result of the primal division or the initial judgment which is creation) and resides in a condition of untruthfulness (of estrangement from God or rejection of God).

For Žižek, the alienation that occurs both at the level of divine immanence and at the level of finitude represents something akin to an absolute lack within the ontological structure of God. Žižek remarks,

Badillon says in Paul Claudel’s L’otage: ‘Dieu ne peut rien sans nous’ [God can do nothing without us].’ This is what Hegel has in mind here: although God is the substance of our entire (human) being, he is impotent without us, he acts only in and through us, he is posited through our activity as its presupposition. This is why Christ is impassive, ethereal, fragile: a purely sympathetic observer, impotent in himself.  

In other words, spirit necessarily develops itself in and through finitude because the Trinity in se is sheer desiring for its actualization. This position has two major consequences: first, it represents the ontological Trinity (the abstract God) as the absolute nothingness Milbank later

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180 Žižek, Monstrosity of Christ, 60-61.
criticizes; and second, it dismisses the notion that while the ontological Trinity is existentially incomplete this does not thereby exclude its logical completeness insofar as it is entirely free, self-sufficient and self-determining.\footnote{In other words, Žižek wishes to bind the divine to the non-divine at the outset rather than recognizing that, for Hegel, the divine always overreaches the non-divine.} While it is true that for Hegel the ontological structure of the immanent Trinity signifies a lack insofar as its goal is to actualize itself as concrete spirit, this cannot be conceived as an absolute lack, for this suggests that Hegel embraces the Boehmian/Gnostic void as the starting point of the divine’s activity. It is this point which is precisely the substance of Milbank’s critique and upon which he bases his claim that Hegel’s spirit is characterized solely by erotic love. O’Regan neatly captures the movement of spirit’s development when he notes,

\begin{quote}
The relation between the immanent Trinity and the economy is then erotic in the strict metaphysical sense of being governed by a movement that overcomes lack. One consequence of this regressive dependence is that it effectively abolishes the classical immanent-economic Trinity schema, since it makes the immanent Trinity something like the first moment of a process of divine self-development from the less to the more real.\footnote{Cyril O’Regan, “The Trinity in Kant, Hegel, and Schelling,” \textit{Oxford Handbook of the Trinity}, edited by Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 259.}
\end{quote}

While O’Regan sums up the basic concept spirit’s self-development from ‘less’ real to ‘more’ real, we must keep in mind that the movement depicted is one which moves from a relative lack toward absolute fulfillment, which is already presupposed in the lack. Expressed from the standpoint of divine immanence, concrete spirit is always already presupposed in the relation between Father and Son: “But we must be aware that all three are spirit. In the third, we say, God

\begin{quote}
\textit{...The absolute idea determines itself and is certain of itself as absolutely free within itself because of this self-determination. For this reason its self-determination involves letting this determinate \[entity\] exist as something free, something independent, or as an independent object. It is only for the being that is free that freedom \textit{is}…"} LPR 3, 1827, E292 G217.
\end{quote}
is the Spirit; but the Spirit is also ‘presupposing,’ the third is also the first. It is essential to hold on to this; it is explained by the nature of the logical concept.” 183 Thus, we should only understand the movement of the Trinity as a movement from lack to fulfillment with the qualification that its fulfillment is always presupposed in its initial ‘lack.’ In other words, we have to avoid the sequential thinking that often accompanies the conceptualization of this movement where the Trinity’s process of self-differentiation and reconciliation follows an orderly set of steps. Instead, we have to reorient our thinking toward the view that the third is always already the first as the first is always already the third. To speak of the Father (the abstract divine) as not yet complete because he has no concrete presence in finitude (the reason the Jewish religion of sublimity cannot attain the speculative idea according to Hegel) must be understood purely from the standpoint of the narrative unfolding of spirit. In itself, spirit is the triune God and is the eternal process of self-differentiation and reconciliation. The Father is only a moment of this, but does not represent the original start of a sequence. In the Lectures of 1827 we find an important elaboration on this point:

God is beginning, he acts in this way; but he is likewise simply the end, the totality, and it is as totality that God is the Spirit. Merely as the Father God is not yet the truth (he is known in this way, without the Son, in the Jewish religion). Rather he is both beginning and end; he is his own presupposition, he constitutes himself as presupposition; he is the eternal process. 184

Without the presence of the Son (of the second mode of the Trinity), God does indeed have within him the characteristic of a lack; however, in the revealed religion, the Father does not

183 LPR 3, 1824, E195 G128.
184 LPR 3, 1827, E284 G209, footnote 93.
exist without the Son. Therefore, to speak of the immanent Trinity as lacking in an absolute sense in fact perpetuates the division between the immanent and economic Trinity rather than emphasizing the holism of the Trinity. We cannot speak of the Father without the Son or about the Son without the Father, nor can we speak of the Trinity at the level of divine immanence without including the historical narrative of spirit; Hegel’s trinitarianism maintains both terms under the concept of spirit which is, in itself, eternal.

Thus, what Žižek fails to account for in his interpretation of Hegelian ontotheology is first, the view that spirit is always already presupposed in the first and second terms of the Trinity and second, that there are two types of alienation at work in Hegel’s philosophy, which are not identical nor can they be collapsed into sameness. In other words, Hegel maintains a loose (flexible) but nevertheless consistent view of the ontological separation between the divine and the non-divine. Without taking these elements into account, Žižek presents exactly the Gnostic/Boehmian logic of spirit as a movement from which spirit emerges from nothing and returns to nothing, i.e. as a strictly nihilistic development in which authentic divine love is impossible. There is, in addition, a further reason Žižek’s account necessarily moves in this atheistic direction: Žižek’s view of the ‘impotence’ of God (the abstract Father and the weak Son) relies in great part on his emphasis of the translation of *das Ungeheure* as ‘monstrous’; indeed, Žižek devotes an entire section to this term. The passage Žižek emphasizes, in which Hegel describes the kenotic movement of Christ, is the following:

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185 This is why Žižek goes so far as to say that God does not exist prior to the Son. However, given Hegel’s emphasis on the eternality of the absolute idea, i.e. of spirit’s self-differentiation and reconciliation, it is difficult to see how we could separate these intrinsic relations in the ontological Trinity and add to them some form of temporal (sequential) characterization. My interpretation, instead, emphasizes the view that we cannot take up the ontological Trinity in separate moments as though each relation constituted ‘actual’ separate moments of development. The movement of spirit is never sequential in spite of the fact that we speak of it as such. Temporal language, like representational concepts, cannot adequately grasp the movement of the ontological Trinity which takes place in eternity. Thus, we speak of the ‘Son’ emanating from the Father, or of spirit ‘emerging’ from the relation between Father and Son, but this always remains representational in character. The actual movement of the immanent Trinity is ‘outside of time,’ and therefore does not follow a sequential narrative.
This is the one and only sensible shape of spirit – it is the appearance of God in the flesh. This is the monstrous reality whose necessity we have seen. What it posits is that divine and human nature are not intrinsically different – God [is] in human shape.¹⁸⁶

*Dies ist die einzige, sinnliche Gestalt des Geistes. Das ist die Erscheinung Gottes im Fleische. Das ist das Ungeheure, dessen Notwendigkeit wir gesehen haben. Es ist damit gesetzt, daß die göttliche und menschlicher Natur nicht an sich verschieden ist – Gott in menschlicher Gestalt.*¹⁸⁷

It is this passage which leads Žizek to state,

Here we reach Hegel’s key insight: Reconciliation cannot be direct, it has first to generate (appear in) a *monster* – twice on the same page Hegel uses this unexpectedly strong word, ‘monstrosity,’ to designate the first figure of Reconciliation, the appearance of God in the finite flesh of a human individual: ‘This is the monstrous [*das Ungeheuer*] whose necessity we have seen.’ The finite fragile human individual is ‘inappropriate’ to stand for God, it is ‘*die Unangemessenheit* [the inappropriateness in general, as such]’. – Are we aware of the properly dialectical paradox of what Hegel claims here? The very attempt at reconciliation, in its first move, produces a monster, a grotesque ‘inappropriateness as such.’”¹⁸⁸

While it is tempting to read Hegel as saying that the kenotic movement of the divine produces a ‘monster,’ a ‘grotesque inappropriateness as such,’ this obfuscates what Hegel is in fact saying: the presence of Christ (of the singular essentiality) on earth is the unique event wherein the two natures – divine and non-divine – are joined together. Hegel does not give this the nightmarish sense Žižek implies; rather, the term ‘monstrous’ here is meant to denote singularity, uniqueness, even awesomeness (in the original sense of the term): Christ presents us with a ‘monstrous

¹⁸⁶ *LPR* 3, 1824, E 214 G146.
reality’ because the hitherto unbridgeable gap between the finite and the infinite is revealed as an illusion. The presence of Christ on earth, the unity of the divine and the non-divine, brings to our human awareness a new actuality, a new world structure. Thus, what is ‘monstrous’ (awe-inspiring) is not Christ in himself, but rather what he signifies: the underlying truth that humankind and God share in the same nature.

This interpretation is given support by the fact that Hegel uses the term ‘monstrosity’ (das Ungeheure) in various places throughout the LPR as well as the Phenomenology. For instance, we read:

The highest divestment of the divine idea – as divestment of itself, i.e., [the idea that] is in addition this divestment – is expressed as follows: ‘God has died, God himself is dead.’ [This] is a monstrous (ungeheure), fearful picture [Vorstellung], which brings before the imagination the deepest abyss of cleavage.189

And, on the same page, we read, “The monstrous unification of these absolute extremes is love itself – [this is] the speculative intuition.”190 At the same time, Hegel uses the same word, das ungeheure, to speak of the contradiction within nature religion in the LPR 2.191 We also see him using the same word in the Phenomenology with respect to the nature religion as well as with respect to the enlightenment’s view of the ‘monstrosities’ produced by superstition.192 The purpose of this exercise is to show that Hegel uses this term in various contexts without placing special emphasis on it; the way in which the word is used suggests that it means something akin to ‘awesome’ or ‘immense’ and even ‘singular,’ but not ‘monstrous’ in the sense of a ‘grotesque inappropriateness.’ Hence, Žižek endows this word with a special significance from which

189 LPR 3, Ms., E125 G60.
190 LPR 3, Ms., E123 G60.
191 See: LPR 2, 1824, E270 G175.
192 See: PS, 424 §698; 340 §557.
follows the rest of his analysis: Christ is the monster (the sad puppet that is neither fully human nor fully divine). But, Hegel does not say this: rather, what he finds monstrous (singular) in the figure of Christ is not Christ himself but Christ insofar as he appears to us, the ‘fallen’ who reside in a world of untruth. What is truthful, what is original, appears to us as something abnormal or even perverse because its presence forces us back on ourselves, on our condition of alienation. This is, without question, a shocking experience in Hegel’s view; it is precisely why he uses such strong language, but it does not suggest that God is a tragi-comic clown who forces us to accept the ‘utter meaninglessness of it all.’

What the monstrosity of Christ signifies, then, is not a nihilistic narrative wherein the presence of the divine in finitude translates into the impotence of God; quite the opposite: the presence of the divine in finitude makes our participation in the divine explicit. The singular essentiality of Christ ushers in the kingdom of spirit. We read: “[Thus the kingdom of God] has its representative (i.e., the mode of its existence) initially in this existing human being, This existence is a natural, ordinary life, which shows [itself] to be imprisoned in the needs of ordinary human life, and in these limits [consists] of finitude.” Hegel’s ultimate point with respect to the figure of Christ is that in no other religion does God take on the nature of humankind so that he might free humankind from its unnaturalness. This is precisely the force behind the Christian narrative; it is always oriented toward the freedom of spirit (of God and world) so that it can be made concrete.

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193 Žižek’s image of Christ (God) is reminiscent of Pinocchio who wants nothing more than to be a ‘real’ boy. Žižek reduces the actualization of spirit to nothing more than this: the divine seeks to become ‘real,’ ‘actual,’ via subordinating itself to finitude. This is precisely contra Hegel’s depiction of the movement of spirit: the ultimate goal of the Christian narrative is not only the actualization of spirit, but the transfiguration of finitude into spirit.

194 LPR 3, Ms., E124 G59.
This brings us to Hegel’s account of the community in which for Žižek God is the virtual substance. More simply, God (spirit) is the product of the community’s activity; insofar as it believes in God (and acts accordingly), God exists. Initially, this might appear as though Žižek were simply presenting us with a revised version of the Jewish religion of sublimity; for Hegel, this religious shape bases its community on an abstract God which actualizes his presence only in and through the law, i.e. of communal rules. Participation in the divine, then, follows from obedience to the law. However, Žižek is careful to say that this particular shape of religion does not work because it places all of the determination of spirit on the side of the finite; in other words, it is the community which posits God and makes him concrete via their activity. Clearly, for Hegel, this is too one-sided, as Žižek admits. Instead, he argues that Hegel advances the figure of Christ as the perfect mediator between the divine and the non-divine insofar as in the Christian religion, “It is not only that humanity becomes conscious of itself in the alienated figure of God, but: in human religion, God becomes conscious of himself.” For Žižek, what this suggests is that the Trinity contains within itself the gap between the divine and the non-divine; it is not merely that this gap emerges within finitude (within humanity), but that it is already presupposed in the ontological concept of God.

What reconciliation accomplishes, then, is not only the reunion of the divine and the non-divine from the standpoint of the human community, but also the reunion of God with himself in the human religion. In other words, spirit enacts reconciliation on both sides. This is the particular work that the presence of Christ accomplishes: Christ, as the monstrous compound, is a purely contingent historical being who nevertheless brings about the necessary development of a new concrete reality. “This is the dialectical reversal of contingency into necessity, i.e., the way

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196 Ibid., 75.
the outcome of a contingent process is the appearance of necessity: things ‘will have been
necessary.’ What Žižek takes this to mean, ultimately, is that spirit posits its own
transcendence in order to negate its transcendence. This is Žižek’s special twist on the Christian
narrative: it is not that humankind posits transcendence so that it might then have the opportunity
to deny it; here, it is spirit (God himself in Christ) who effaces transcendence through his very
presence which signifies precisely the non-existence of the ‘Big Other.’

The ultimate point of this narrative is that first, we escape the problem of having the
community posit its own God as we find in the Marxist-Feuerbachian schema and second, we
affirm the presence of God only as a virtual substance rather than the reified substance of
classical theism, thereby removing the division between God and world. What we are left with,
effectively, is a Christian logic which sublates itself in order to enter its next stage, i.e.
materialist atheism. The underlying problem with Žižek’s project, however, is that he simply
does not consider the possibility that transcendence does not automatically indicate something
like the reified substance, the ‘Big Other,’ or the distant sovereign. In other words, all
transcendence, according to Žižek, signifies the degenerative sense of transcendence Hegel so
emphatically sought to avoid. But, in respecting this aspect of Hegel’s critical stance concerning
the ‘bad’ transcendence of classical theism, he fails to see that there is nevertheless an
opportunity for transcendence which does not admit the distant God of the beyond, but which
does not fall into a nihilistic pure immanence either. In other words, Žižek does not imagine the
possibility of a theory of mutual immanence which does not reduce the divine to the human or
the human to the divine. In part, this is precisely the critique Milbank will present.

197 Ibid., 77.
198 This is Žižek’s point about the final words of Christ on the cross: the ‘Father, why have you forsaken me?’ is
meant to express the fact that in the Christian religion, even God does not believe in the ‘Father,’ i.e. the
transcendent being of the Beyond. God denies his own transcendence.
In what follows, I will turn to Milbank’s argument contra Žižek as well as his criticisms concerning Hegelian ontotheology. It is my position that while Milbank gives a compelling critique of Žižek’s reinterpretation of the Hegelian narrative of spirit, he too often conflates Žižek and Hegel by characterizing them as continuing in the tradition of the ‘Protestant metanarrative,’ which is why both their accounts lead to atheism. In my view, this glosses over Hegel’s own dynamic theology a little too quickly, while also suggesting that Protestantism is akin to atheism, a view which is fundamentally reductive of the Protestant theistic tradition.

**Implied Nihilism in the Protestant Metanarrative: Milbank’s Critique of Hegelian Ontotheology**

Milbank’s main point of disagreement with Žižek, as I have already stated elsewhere, lies not in their respective conclusions concerning Hegel’s reinterpretation of Christian doctrine, but rather in what they believe is the proper way to understand Christian doctrine. He writes,

I wish to argue that he [Žižek] concludes that atheistic Christianity is true Christianity only because he accepts a dialectical (Lutheran, Behmenist, Kantian, Hegelian) version of Christian doctrine as the most coherent. By contrast, I claim that there is a radically Catholic humanist alternative to this, which sustains genuine transcendence only because of its commitment to incarnational paradox.\(^{199}\)

There are several points worth noting here: first, Milbank argues that the atheistic/theistic debate merely conceals a more salient and longer-standing debate between Protestantism and Catholicism.\(^ {200}\) Thus, the question of whether Hegel is an atheist or genuinely theistic disguises the real tension at play, i.e. Hegel’s general commitment to a more Protestant narrative, which in

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\(^{200}\) Ibid., 126-131.
Milbank’s eyes, inevitably leads toward atheism. Second, and closely related to the first point, Milbank suggests that dialectical thinking is the result of a Protestant perspective whereas paradoxical reasoning is fundamental to a Catholic mentality. This is why Žižek’s reliance on the works of Eckhart and Chesterton is so puzzling to Milbank – both exhibit a commitment to a Catholic, and therefore paradoxical, methodology. This is contra Hegel’s position which Milbank views as purely Protestant in spite of Hegel’s own acknowledgement of specifically Catholic theology (for instance, Eckhartian mysticism) and Catholic spirituality more broadly. Third, Milbank implies here that a Protestant/dialectical view necessarily concludes in the loss of a transcendent God whereas Catholicism/paradox upholds genuine transcendence. Thus, Milbank is not merely claiming that Hegel’s own ontotheology leads to atheism and nihilism but that all Protestantism, by virtue of its reliance on dialectical logic, leads to this conclusion. Finally, Milbank is suggesting here that only a paradoxical/Catholic logic can maintain a tension between contingency and necessity without falling into the trap of one collapsing onto the other. Protestantism, on the contrary, can only uphold one side or the other: either everything in reality follows from necessity or everything reduces to mere contingency, the latter position being the ‘postmodern’ resuscitation of the former. Milbank’s response to Žižek, then, is in reality a critique of the Protestant metanarrative, to which both Žižek and Hegel are indebted. In what follows, I will address each of these claims in accordance with the way in which Milbank sets them out and with an eye toward Žižek’s responses. I will conclude by attempting to demonstrate that although we cannot consider Hegel a Catholic thinker, his Christian ontotheology does not fall into nihilism as both Žižek and Milbank claim. Indeed, I will argue that there is room for transcendence and paradoxical reasoning in Hegel’s account, both of which suggest that Hegel’s account of religion is theistic, and even mystical, rather than atheistic.
We begin with Milbank’s principle claim that Hegel’s ontotheology conforms to a specifically Protestant logic rather than a Catholic logic. Milbank states, “The key illusion of the Protestant metanarrative is that the mode in which modernity has occurred, and the stages that it has gone through, are the necessary and only possible mode and stages.”

According to Milbank, the aspect of necessity within the dialectical unfolding of spirit is the hallmark of Protestant thought. Insofar as Protestantism has for its goal the internalization of the divine (spirit) within the singular subject, this implies that each event in the development of spirit is ‘necessary’ in order to reach this goal. In other words, the telos of Protestantism is the driving force behind spirit’s development in finitude. What Protestantism takes from the Christian narrative is the death and resurrection of the incarnate divine necessarily leads to the internalization of spirit. According to Milbank, Protestantism commits the error of retroactively interpreting the work of the incarnate divine as culminating in its own demise, i.e. the goal of Christ is to effectively overcome himself (Christ is only the ‘vanishing mediator’). This is the radical difference between Catholicism and Protestantism: while Catholicism maintains the concrete internal (trans-substantive) presence of Christ in the church, Protestantism rejects this ‘fetishization’ in favor of the concrete internal (subjective) presence of spirit in humankind.

Milbank’s interpretation returns us to a question already raised in Hegel’s time regarding the status of revelation, i.e. if revelation takes place among different religious communities by necessity or if these locales of the development of spirit are purely contingent. Milbank, however, wishes to distance himself from those who favor a necessitarian or progressivist reading of Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative. Instead, he notes, “Hegel indicates not the logical inevitability of the course of human history, but rather the dependency of even our most abstract, universal assumptions on past contingent events that might have

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201 Ibid., 114.
occurred otherwise and retain and unlimited potential for alternative renderings.”

Although Milbank claims that Hegel eventually succumbs to a kind of necessitarianism classical theism cannot accept, he nevertheless rejects the notion that Hegel’s processual logic is conditioned by ‘strict’ necessity (in spite of the fact that this is, according to Milbank, the hallmark of Protestant thought).

At the same time, Milbank criticizes Žižek on precisely these grounds, for while Žižek also rejects reading Hegelian dialectical logic as strictly necessitarian, Žižek himself slips into precisely this kind of necessitarian logic. This is why, in Milbank’s view, Žižek’s reinterpretation of Hegelian ontotheology is Protestant, and therefore subject to the criticism that necessity falls into pure contingency and vice versa. The reason Žižek is able to extract this postmodern revision of the Protestant theodicy is because Hegel has already laid out the groundwork for a purely immanentized spirit. While the dialectical unfolding of revelation does not follow from a strict historical necessity, its radical contingency ultimately amounts to the same problem, i.e. things will have been necessary; contingency is only the guise of retroactive necessity. Nor does the contingency of history take away from the ultimate aim of the Protestant theodicy, i.e. the internalization of spirit. Milbank notes,

While one can agree with Žižek that Hegel does not demonstrate the fated logical necessity of all reality, but rather that there is only random and aporetic contingent finitude, and that this is the content of ‘absolute truth,’ he does not sufficiently recognize that this very apotheosis of the random involves a claim to perfect insight into the fated logical necessity of the real.

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202 Ibid., 114.  
203 Ibid., 115.
A Catholic perspective, by contrast, does not fall into this problem, according to Milbank. Catholicism does not admit of any historical necessity in the divine revelation: the ‘fall’ was not preordained; Christ could have appeared at any time and place; even the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, the central events of Christian dogma, could be imagined differently. Contingency within the Catholic perspective, according to Milbank who borrows this from Alan Badiou, is thick – the events which have led up to the modern and postmodern ages “refuse mediation.” This is precisely what Milbank sees as the fundamental problem of dialectical thinking: given that it always attempts to find some reconciliation between two opposing or agonistic terms, it cannot permit any meaningful unmediated term. Since the Protestant narrative is in his view always concerned with the necessity of contingent events, dialectical logic allows each event to be understood as something mediated, as something which follows logically from something else. This, in turn, adds the aspect of necessity to contingency, for even if events are contingent, they develop in and through a preconfigured system which, even if only retroactively, guarantees their necessity, i.e. their meaningfulness within the system.

Even Žižek, whose ultimate aim is to show that the Christian narrative exposes the ‘utter meaninglessness of it all,’ falls prey to what Milbank perceives as an internal contradiction: in order to arrive at a place of pure nihilism via dialectical reasoning, one must be committed to the necessity of the method which allows us to arrive at this conclusion in the first place. Each event has meaning insofar as it progresses in such a way as to show that what underlies it is bare nothingness, the pure nihil which undermines the meaningfulness of the narrative as a whole. This lack of openness, or of flexibility, for events which refuse mediation is in Milbank’s view the downfall of the dialectical method, and it is precisely on these grounds that he argues dialectical reasoning can never fully admit paradox, the hallmark of genuinely Christian thought.

Furthermore, while Milbank appears to reject the reading of Hegel that labels him a necessitarian, he nevertheless attempts to show that this is the only possible interpretation of Hegel’s metaphysics, and, in consequence, of his ontotheology. The reason for this is two-fold: first, Milbank rejects Hegel’s logical concept of being as empty of content, i.e. that being is essentially synonymous with nothingness. Milbank writes, “He [Hegel] assumes a Scotist univocity or quasi-genericity for being. He does not dismiss because he does not even consider, the Thomistic alternative: namely that being qua being might be an embodied plenitude, identical with the infinite realization of all actual and possible essentialities.”

Milbank criticizes Hegel on the grounds that he can only envision being as identical to nothingness rather than considering the possibility that being is absolute plenitude. Due to his insistence that abstract being is identical to nothingness, the dialectical movement can only ever begin with nothing. And, because Hegel is not providing his audience a pre-critical dogmatic metaphysics or, contra certain readings, a revised Kantian transcendental metaphysics, Hegel cannot be giving us merely the content or form of thought, but must also be describing concrete reality. Consequently, the nothingness he uses as his starting point carries with it ontological weight, i.e. being qua being is fundamentally nothing in itself. This is why Milbank argues against the comparison Žižek posits between Eckhart and Hegel: Eckhart’s apophatic theology posits an identity between being and nothing, the nothing is not empty or, more properly, it is not emptiness itself. 

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205 Ibid., 138.
206 This is also why comparisons between Eckhart’s theology and Buddhist philosophy can be problematic. From the broader Buddhist standpoint, the ultimate level of reality (the ‘truth’ of reality) is emptiness (śūnyatā). What this means, more practically, is that while conventional appearances are real, they do not have any underlying essence or permanence. In more western terms, we can say that there is no ‘thing-in-itself’ behind the appearance. By contrast, Eckhart’s notion of ‘nothingness’ always refers to the godhead and has the function of negative theology: the nothingness is used to express our (and even God’s) inability to access the godhead’s essence. Still, this ‘nothingness’ is an absolute plenitude, an overflowing source from which all things follow, and in this sense, there is a relation between Buddhism and Eckhartian mysticism. Thus, work on the relation between Eckhartian mysticism
There is much at stake in this argument, for if we concede that Hegel’s nihil is empty of content – that rather than embodying absolute plenitude, it is the pure void of infinity – then both Žižek and Milbank are correct in saying that Hegel’s ontotheology ultimately concludes in a kind of doctrine of immanence which is ‘atheistic.’ However, there are several problems with this interpretation. First, as O’Regan argues, there is no basis for interpreting the starting point of Hegel’s dialectic, i.e. the nothing, as an absolute or oukontic nothing; rather it should be understood as meontic or relative.\(^{207}\) What this suggests is that rather than interpreting Hegel to say that the world is created out of absolute nothing, one should more properly interpret him as saying that the world emerges (is created) from becoming (Werden), i.e. out of the synthesis of being and nothing. Since Hegel explicitly states that God is becoming, creatio ex nihilo is, in fact, creatio ex Deo.\(^{208}\) In LPR 1, Hegel remarks, “And when we say ‘God,’ this word signifies the absolute, all-encompassing fulfillment, [the truth of everything [that subsists] as this world of finitude and appearance]. God is its power generally, the substance of the accidents, having or encompassing [everything] within himself.”\(^{209}\) Hodgson goes a step further in his interpretation of the nihil, noting that, “the nihil is the pure possibility of being that subsists within God as the inexhaustible source out of which God releases otherness to become something free and independent, yet still connected.”\(^{210}\) On this reading, the nothingness with which the dialectic begins is not merely an empty void, but is rather the pure potentiality of all being.

and Zen Buddhism is particularly fruitful and continues to thrive. For more on this see: Ueda Shizuteru, “Nothingness in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism,” The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and its Contemporaries (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), 157-170. Also, Robert E. Carter, “God and Nothingness,” Philosophy East and West, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Jan. 2009), pp. 1-21.\(^{207}\) O’Regan, Heterodox Hegel, 147.\(^{208}\) For Milbank, this is an atheistic view since classical theism maintains that creation is always posited by God; it does not emerge from God. To say that creation flows from God is to imply something akin to a pantheistic doctrine, which is contrary to a properly theistic position which upholds the ontological separation of the divine and the non-divine.\(^{209}\) LPR 1, Ms., E230 G140.\(^{210}\) Hodgson, Hegel and Christian Theology, 257.
It is helpful here to briefly look at Hegel’s *Logic* where he notes that being “in its pure indeterminate immediacy is equal only to itself. It is pure indeterminateness and emptiness.”²¹¹ Bearing this in mind, Hodgson’s reading might be in danger of making Hegel’s position rather more orthodox than it is; the characterization of pure being as the ‘pure possibility of being,’ if taken to mean something like absolute plenitude from which all potentialities flow, is a more classically theistic position than what Hegel himself posits. When Hegel states that being in its pure indeterminate immediacy is equal only to itself, he means that existence is necessarily mediated. In other words, pure indeterminate immediacy does not have the quality of existence in itself; rather it can only serve as the condition or limit which grounds the possibility of existence. In this sense it is the ‘pure possibility of being,’ the pure potentiality of existing things (both concepts and objects) insofar as, in conjunction with its antithesis (nothing), it is the underlying principle of thought and reality. More simply, pure being in its indeterminate immediacy cannot be said to have existence in itself; thus Milbank’s claim that spirit begins as pure being which is equally pure nothing (and that this has *ontological* weight) adds the quality of existence to terms (modes) which only subsist insofar as their difference and the sublation of the difference is contained in the concrete existential term ‘becoming.’ In theological terms, what this amounts to is the following: the ‘Father’ (pure being/God) does not have the quality of existence insofar as he is defined as the abstract infinite; the Son (in which the Father divests himself entirely so that the Son is the perfect image of the Father) is at one and the same time both God and not-God, i.e. the nothing, non-being – the Son does not have the quality of ‘other’-being. The Son is also indicative of the realm of particularly; the Son is the particularization of the Father and is, at the same time, finitude (the negation of the infinite which has being only be virtue of being-other). Finally, we come to spirit which is the *only* concrete existential mode of

the ontological Trinity; only spirit exists at the level of divine immanence because spirit is
presupposed in the first and second terms of the Trinitarian schema. The Father and the Son are
only ‘modes’ of spirit, i.e. spirit’s self-differentiation within itself. Spirit is ‘becoming,’ which
means that it is in fact logically and essentially prior to the logical limits of being and nothing or
‘Father’ and ‘Son.’

Milbank’s own view, by contrast, maintains a vision of God as pure being which is
classified exactly by the degenerative transcendence Hegel wishes to avoid. He imparts to
Hegel’s ontotheology his own commitment to an abstract transcendent being (the absolute
plenitude) and then criticizes Hegel for having reduced this absolute plentitude of pure being to
pure nothingness, to the empty void which leads to nihilism. “Hegel does not speak of a benign
‘conicidence’ of being with nullity (in the manner of Meister Eckhart). Instead, in a truly
nihilistic fashion (as he explicitly concedes), he sees nothingness as always undermining being
from within and being as always struggling to be born from this dark womb.” More simply,
instead of placing ‘becoming,’ or spirit (the ‘third’ term) in the original (primary) position,
Milbank makes the mistake of assigning to the dialectical process a reified original concept of
being which, in his view, is identical to nothingness. Instead of realizing that the pure being and
the pure nothing of the dialectic are not in themselves ‘things,’ he takes them to signify precisely

212 In this sense, Milbank falls into exactly the problem Hegel critiques in the ontological proof for the existence of
God; Milbank adds to the quality of existence to the concept of pure being because he maintains the perfection of
God, i.e. the concept of God guarantees the perfection of God which necessarily includes existence. Hegel does not
stray too far from the ontological proof, but he does say that it is inadequate precisely because it assumes the quality
of existence. However, in the dialectical logic of spirit, spirit comes to existence via its self-differentiation between
universal abstract being and particularized appearance (which is equally non-being). Existence is therefore not an
added quality, but an accomplished aspect of spirit. Williams adds, “Hegel transforms the original ontological proof
from an inference from a subjective mental concept to its existence, into an account of a self-mediating concept of
totality: ‘in its own right the idea is essentially concrete, because it is the free concept that determines itself, and in
so doing makes itself real.’” Robert R. Williams, Hegel on the Proofs and Personhood of God: Studies in Hegel’s
213 Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 139.
this, which is why they never gesture toward anything beyond themselves nor can dialectical logic ever explain how it moves to a new concept without appealing to an external proposition.

Milbank’s argument relies on conceiving of pure being as pure nothingness, as the nihil from which all mediated existence emerges. However, in understanding pure being this way, Milbank is not interpreting the nihil as a limit, but rather as a something, as something with the quality of existence. This is why he notes that the nihil has “ontological weight.”214 However, if we interpret the nihil as having ontological weight only insofar as it is a limit from which differentiation, i.e. mediated existence, can emerge, the nihil does not lead to nihilism but rather toward something like Hodgson’s idea of the ‘pure potentiality of being.’ Second, Milbank notes that Hegel does not even consider the possibility that being qua being might be an absolute plenitude embodying all possible and actual existence. However, this is not entirely the case for Hegel’s ontotheology seeks to address two problems, namely, the impersonal Being of Spinozism on the one hand and static enlightenment conceptions of absolute being on the other. The problem, for Hegel, is that if we are to consider absolute being as pure plentitude, it easily remains the purely transcendent impersonal being which is empty of content. In short, we are given an account of a pure being that must undergo some kind of process of becoming rather than a being who is this very process of becoming. We also fall into the same problem with which are left at the end of Spinoza’s Ethics: either everything that has possible or actual existence is simply an attribute of God in which case, all is God (God is everything and there is no real distinction between God and not-God), or everything that has possible or actual existence

214 At the same time, Milbank explicitly faults Hegel on the grounds that the categories of being, nothing and becoming are merely logical and not ontological; they cannot express a genuine realism because they are fundamentally empty of content. See: Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 137. Thus, what Hegel presents to us, according to Milbank, is a false ontology: being, nothing and becoming are purely formal categories which, while never being able to posit actual ontological content, nevertheless give the pretense or illusion of expressing genuine ontological truth. Milbank could have gone farther than Desmond who calls Hegel’s ontotheology a ‘counterfeit theology,’ and said that Hegel gives us a counterfeit ontology. See: Desmond, Hegel’s Theology: A Counterfeit Double?, 106.
is God, in which case God is simply a sum of all his parts (and again, there is no real distinction between God and not-God).

For Hegel, however, there remains in the logical development of spirit an essential distinction between the divine and the non-divine insofar as negativity (other-being) is necessary to the constitution of spirit. We find evidence of this precisely in the establishment of the spiritual community wherein, “being-for-self and being-for-other are not exclusive, but rather mutually inclusive in an enlarged mentality that is identity in and through difference. In other words, personhood is sublated in spirit.”

What Milbank fails to see here is that Hegelian dialectical logic retains paradoxical logic in the affirmative movement of concrete spirit. To be sure, we do not encounter two mutually exclusive terms such as ‘God’ and ‘world’ so that any relation between the two is always externally conditioned or conditioned solely by one side. This is precisely the characterization of divine to non-divine relationality Hegel wishes to avoid. At the same time, this does not suggest that the non-divine is absorbed into the divine or that the divine is absorbed into the non-divine such that all essential difference is removed. Rather, Hegel posits a middle path wherein, paradoxically, unity is established via two essential moments: identity and difference. Both must be present in order to posit a genuine unity which is not merely the positing of self-sameness or the positing of radical difference.

The reason Milbank fails to this this aspect of paradox at work in dialectical logic is due to his conflation of paradox and contradiction: insofar as dialectical logic seeks to overcome contradiction, it is true that a contradictory ‘remainder’ cannot be upheld. However, contradictions are not synonymous to paradoxes: the former implies incoherence insofar as the two terms actively negate one another; the latter, by contrast, signifies two equally

\[^{215}\text{Williams, Proofs and Personhood of God, 241.}\]
affirmative, positive terms which can subsist without denying the validity of the other. The relationship between the two terms in the latter logical formulation is one without the antagonistic negativity of the former. Given that spirit is love, the kind of relation we find between the divine and the non-divine, while initially being defined according to the former, i.e. to contradiction, develops into the latter, i.e. paradox. In the loving exchange, the two terms are maintained in their respective absolute identities while simultaneously acknowledging that this stronger (more robust) formulation of their identities is developed in and through the other. In other words, it is via the encounter with the other that the individual being is affirmed as a singular subject. The status of the other is not jeopardized here for it is a mutual recognition where the other, too, is altered via the encounter with individual being. Applied to the movement of spirit, we see that spirit only becomes concrete via its immersion into other-being, an immersion so extreme that it takes on the highest aspect of other-being, namely, death. However, through this immersion, it is ‘resurrected,’ i.e. it ‘wins’ itself back and obtains the concrete knowledge that this otherness is a moment contained within it. In Hegel’s speculative description of the Christian narrative, a similar movement is found on the side of finitude: the finite spiritual being immerses herself into spirit (the ecstatic moment, the religious community) and ‘wins’ herself back as concrete, for she obtains the knowledge that she essentially belongs to spirit, to the infinite. The movement between the two, i.e. between the divine and the non-divine, signifies not a merely intellectual change wherein both conceive of themselves in a new way; it alters the very essential being of both. On the side of the divine, spirit becomes concrete to itself; on the side of the non-divine, a new actuality (a new reality) emerges. The divine and the non-divine no longer subsist in an antagonistic tension, but are now in the position to recognize one another as
belonging essentially to one another while maintaining their respective identities which are made stronger by virtue of this mutually inclusivity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the major aspects of Milbank’s and Žižek’s debate concerning the conclusion of the Hegelian narrative of spirit. I have highlighted the major reasons why both advance the view that Hegel’s account is fundamentally nihilistic/atheistic as well as my own responses to their charge. We have seen that, for Žižek, the dialectical logic of spirit lays the groundwork for a divine that ultimately subverts itself by exposing the utter meaninglessness of reality: Žižek’s concluding argument is that Christ expresses the tragic recognition that there is no God. By contrast, Milbank believes that Hegelian dialectical logic cannot admit a strict relationality between the divine and the non-divine because either spirit is wholly self-involved or spirit is conceived as the whole wherein all claim to radical difference collapses. My responses to their arguments have attempted to show that for Hegel, Christ is not the tragi-comic clown who exposes the falsity of material existence nor is Hegelian absolute spirit merely self-relating so that we conclude with something like the crude pantheism Hegel explicitly rejects. Instead, the role of Christ expresses the generosity of divine being; it is the ultimate expression of the Christian kenosis wherein the divine gives all in order to immerse itself into other-being and reemerge as altered yet still divine (even ‘more’ divine, i.e. ‘more real’). As a response to Milbank’s critique I have shown that it is not only the divine which undergoes this radical change but also the community such that a new reality which is no longer mere finitude emerges. Spirit cannot be self-relating if it is understood as genuinely concrete, as having the character of
personality; instead, it must give itself over to the other (in more Christian language, the divine
must risk itself) so that it may have the genuine experience of the other which it can then take up
into itself. This is not a purely formal or logical move; rather, the divine experiences human
alienation and effects reconciliation.

In the following chapter, I propose to continue this work by expanding upon the notion
that God is ‘absolving,’ in order to put forward the argument that Hegel’s logic of spirit is
fundamentally theistic rather than atheistic, that it is not nihilistic but instead emphasizes the
fullness of an actuality shaped by the loving encounter between the divine and the non-divine.
Furthermore, I contend that Hegel’s absolute spirit must be conceived as having genuine
personality upon its transfiguration into spirit, and that it is precisely this aspect of the divine
which allows for a paradoxical relation which maintains the integrity of both the divine and the
non-divine.
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Chapter Three

Toward Mutual Immanence: Eckhart’s Mysticism in the Debate Between Žižek and Milbank

The debate between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek highlights a variety of underlying tensions within Hegelian ontotheology and the role Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative plays in his larger philosophical project. Thus far, we have been concerned with the metaphysical and theological claims Milbank and Žižek have put forth: both seek to show that Hegel’s absolute spirit lends itself to an interpretation which prioritizes a species of pure immanentism which leads toward what is fundamentally an atheistic and nihilistic conclusion. For Žižek, this is best exemplified by Hegel’s Christology which overthrows the assumption that Christ ‘replaces’ the transcendent God by demonstrating that there is no ‘Big Other’ in the first place. Christ is, instead, the ‘vanishing mediator’ who, by virtue of his historical presence in finitude, effects the transformation of the religious community and transfigures himself into the virtual substance that is spirit. But, for Žižek, spirit is not ‘other’ to the community; instead, spirit is the community in a way that affirms the identity between human beings and God. In other words, the presence of spirit in the community signals the divinization of humankind. Milbank, for his part, argues that because Hegelian ontotheology begins in the pure void of being rather than the theistic absolute plenitude, spirit cannot effect any genuine movement. Instead, spirit can only be conceived as fundamentally self-relating: an erotic play of love within its own relations such that the movement of the three Trinitarian categories is merely an empty oscillation between purely formal terms. Because dialectical logic does not permit paradox, a genuinely syllogistic third term, i.e. spirit, is never allowed to break free from the back and forth of the Father and Son. This leads Milbank to state that Hegelian trinitarianism is,
in fact, a spiritual monism: the first two terms of the Trinity are merely illusory and their ‘relation,’ which relies on otherness (negativity), collapses into self-sameness. Due to the status of the Trinity at the level of divine immanence, Milbank is able to claim that any relation between God and world is truly impossible in the Hegelian schema.

Contra these claims, I have argued first that the transfiguration of spirit which, in the Christian narrative corresponds to the resurrection and ascension of Christ and the subsequent ‘descent’ of spirit into the world, is a double transfiguration wherein the community does not passively receive spirit, but undergoes a genuine qualitative change. A new world or new actuality is posited by the movement of spirit. Žižek is aware that the status of our reality (of the finite world) hinges upon the development of spirit; however, he believes the transfiguration of the world is achieved via Christ, i.e. through the appearance of the ‘monster.’ The kind of theodicy Žižek presents, then, is one wherein the divine participates with the non-divine in and through the singular being of Christ, but nowhere else. The community only participates in the divine insofar as it upholds the memory of the tragi-comic clown, Christ. Žižek’s account of the community does not suggest that it has a living knowledge of the presence of spirit; instead, he views its activity as an always extended moment of nostalgia for what once was. The community does not genuinely participate in the divine because it participates only in itself; the divine has vanished along with its mediator. Thus, Žižek’s interpretation can only be atheistic and nihilistic, as Milbank claims.

However, Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative emphasizes a much stronger concept of participation with the divine via a theistic vision of mutual immanence. Both the divine and the non-divine undergo a genuine change upon their double transfiguration. First, and from a theistic perspective perhaps most crucially, spirit achieves genuine transcendence.
This is the not a species of transcendence which is then negated or canceled out because it is the achievement of personhood, of concrete subjectivity. Spirit moves from Substance to Subject. This stands in direct contrast to Milbank’s claim that Hegelian (Protestant) theology always has for its aim the internalization of spirit. Without question the internalization of spirit in the community is an aspect of the narrative; however, Milbank sees this as the only goal of spirit. This is because he, like Žižek, fails to see a strong conception of mutual immanence in the Hegelian reworking of the Christian narrative. In the transfiguration of the community, the world of finitude is sublated – it is not negated such that it collapses into the infinite, but is annulled and preserved. Simultaneously, spirit is internalized in the community, but this does not negate genuine transcendence because spirit is preserved in identity and difference; in other words, because spirit is a person (in the full sense), it requires the recognition of the ‘other,’ which is both identical yet distinct. This is precisely the concept of love, of reciprocity, which defines spirit. Milbank fails to see that this is paradoxical because he equates paradox with contradiction rather than understanding that Hegelian dialectical logic, while have the movement of positing and resolving contradiction, is perfectly comfortable with maintaining paradox. In theological terms, this is expressed as absolute spirit which is unity in and through identity and difference. The ultimate ‘paradox’ of dialectical logic follows Williams’ statement, “Suppress the identity, and the whole disintegrates into isolated fragments; suppress the difference and the whole collapses into abstract unity, monism and undifferentiated identity.”

Milbank’s error, therefore, is two-fold: first, he equates the logic of the absolute idea with the logic of absolute spirit; second, he equates paradox with contradiction thereby reducing dialectical logic to an empty oscillation between contradictory terms while failing to see that the key concept of

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dialectical logic is sublation (*Aufgehoben*), which annuls and preserves. In other words, paradoxical thinking is an element of dialectical logic: absolute spirit is a determinate unity in and through the paradoxical maintenance of identity and difference. If we see paradox as pure contradiction, as Milbank suggests, then his theistic position is unable to admit intersubjective relationality, for God and world are mutually exclusive terms unless God posits the relation out of thin air. This reverts to the classical theistic position which upholds the division between the finite and the infinite, i.e. the dualism which Hegel expressly seeks to overcome.

Given these tensions within Žižek’s and Milbank’s perspectives, I now wish to address the second aspect of their debate, namely, the role Meister Eckhart plays in Hegelian ontotheology as well as their respective visions of Eckhartian theology. My aim in bringing Meister Eckhart to the fore is to show first that Žižek is not wrong in bringing Eckhart into the conversation concerning Hegelian absolute spirit. In other words, the achieved identity between the divine and the non-divine is a key component of Eckhartian theology, which, if viewed comparatively, bears marked similarities to Hegelian ontotheology. Thus, Milbank’s critique that Eckhart is completely out of place with respect to the explicit Protestantism of Hegel’s theology is, in my view, exaggerated; Eckhart can be very useful, especially with respect to the question of divine immanence. Second, I wish to show that both Eckhart and Hegel espouse a view of mutual immanence which does not take away from the character of God, but rather guarantees his transcendence. I refer to this as the concept of double ecstasy, which is present in both their theologies. In addition, both Eckhart and Hegel emphasize the personhood or personality of God as precisely that which affirms the genuine independence or freedom of the divine as well as the non-divine, i.e. the identity and difference between God and world. Finally, I wish to advance the view that Hegel’s exposition of the double transfiguration of God and world leads to a
specifically mystical theism which does not fall into atheism or nihilism, but rather supports a view of an intersubjectively constituted relationality between the divine and non-divine which while positing an essential identity nevertheless leaves the radical freedom of the other intact.

This chapter will be organized as follows: the first section concerns the concept of absolution which in contrast to popular interpretations denotes the releasing activity on the part of the divine. This is not a release from ‘sin’ but refers instead to the release of ‘other-being’ from its otherness such that it may recognize its unity with the divine. The second section of this chapter addresses the concept of double ecstasis upon which an understanding of the transfiguration of both the divine and the non-divine hinges. In other words, I wish to advance the view that Hegel’s dialectical logic of spirit includes not only the transformation of the divine but equally a radical transformation of finitude. This is an especially important point with respect to the charge that Hegel’s account is atheistic or nihilistic, for it suggests that by positing a theology of mutual immanence, Hegel maintains the integrity of both the divine and the non-divine. I include aspects of Eckhart’s work throughout this section because it is with respect to the conceptualization of identity-and-difference in the divine and the non-divine that his work is particularly helpful. The third section, then, is concerned with precisely the second aspect of the double transfiguration of God and world. In other words, it addresses the divinization of humankind in a way that does not devolve into a self-positing of the absolute nor does it imply upholding the reified divine of classical theism. Instead, I maintain that by understanding Hegelian ontotheology via the aim of achieving mutual immanence, Hegel avoids falling into either of these traps and instead presents us with a theodicy which conforms to the Christian theistic tradition.
The Absolution of Spirit

Peter C. Hodgson in *Hegel and Christian Theology* has advanced the view that concept of absoluteness in Hegelian ontotheology should be understood in relation to the verb ‘to release’ (*Entlassen*). In other words, Hodgson argues that the use of the term absolute refers to its original meaning which stems from the Latin verb *absolvere*, meaning to ‘release’ or ‘let free.’ Thus, absolute spirit can also be thought of as ‘releasing’ or ‘absolving’ spirit. The best example of the correspondence between the term ‘absolute’ and the concept of ‘release’ can be found in the following passage:

> Only the absolute idea determines itself and is certain of itself as absolutely free within itself because of this self-determination. For this reason its self-determination involves letting this determinate [entity] exist as something free, something independent, or as an independent object. It is only for the being that is free that freedom is; it is only for the free human being that an other has freedom too. It belongs to the absolute freedom of the idea that, in its act of determining and dividing, it releases the other to exist as a free and independent being. This other, released as something free and independent, is *the world* as such.  

> Es ist nur die absolute Idee, die sich bestimmt, dies Bestimmte als Freies zu entlassen, so daß es als Selbständiges ist, als selbständiges Objekt. Das Freie ist nur für das Freie vorhanden; nur für den freien Menschen ist ein anderer auch als frei. Es ist die absolute Freiheit der Idee, daß sie in ihrem Bestimmen, Urteilen, das Andere als ein Freies, Selbständiges entläßt. Dies Andere als ein Freies, Selbständiges entlassen, ist die Welt überhaupt.

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According to this passage, the absolute idea (which is related to but not identical to absolute spirit) is absolutely free, i.e. self-determining. At the same time, its self-determination, its freedom, requires it to release other-being such that it, too, is radically free and independent. Thus, what defines the absolute idea is precisely its freedom which, paradoxically, necessitates its creation of other-being. We must remember here that the kind of necessity which conditions the absolute idea is purely internal; it is never an alien necessity which forces the absolute idea to release other-being from itself.\textsuperscript{220} At the same time, it is a strict necessity insofar as the movement from the absolute idea to absolute spirit requires a transition from substance to subject; in other words, genuine otherness is a condition for the possibility of establishing personhood. Spirit cannot be a person (a subject) if it does not have an other through which to ‘win back’ its concrete personality. This might sound as though the necessity which governs the movement of spirit comes from an external source insofar as it is derived from a relation that privileges other-being; however, spirit generates and creates its own other.\textsuperscript{221} It is always spirit itself which is privileged over and above the other whose very being as other is dependent upon spirit. This is why Hegel states, “[The Christian religion is] the religion of reconciliation (Versöhnung) – of the world with God. God, it is said, has reconciled the world with himself.”\textsuperscript{222} The form this statement takes expresses not the idea that the world reconciles itself to God, but rather than God reconciles the world with himself. This reversal is important, for it supports the

\textsuperscript{220} This is undoubtedly one of the main problems Milbank, following from an orthodox Christian perspective, sees in Hegel’s ontotheology: it is precisely this aspect of necessity which Milbank sees as a Protestant corruption of Christian theology. See: John Milbank, “The Double Glory: Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” Monstrosity of Christ (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 151.

\textsuperscript{221} Spirit at the level of divine immanence generates its own other via its externalization, i.e. the first moment of divine kenosis. At the economic level, spirit creates the other, i.e. world. See: LPR 3, 1827, E293 G218. Thus, spirit has both its own other contained within it and ‘its’ other which has genuinely free existence. With respect to Hodgson’s concept of absolution, we are more concerned with the latter insofar as it is the relation between the divine and the non-divine that is at stake in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{222} LPR 3, Ms., E65 G4.
view that it is always spirit that effects the reconciliatory movement; the divine is the active agent of reconciliation.\footnote{From the standpoint of the tension Milbank and Desmond raise regarding the kind of love implicit in spirit, the emphasis on reconciliation as an activity of the divine rather than the non-divine suggests agapeic love rather than erotic love.}

The concept of absolution, therefore, refers to the positing of freedom within the other, a freedom which the other is then able to express via his interaction with an other at the level of finitude. In other words, the identity between the divine and the non-divine concerns, primarily, the aspect of freedom. Thus, the concept of absolution cannot be understood according to the standard sense of the term, i.e. as a release from a debt or from the condition of sinfulness. These are the general connotations of the term ‘absolution.’ Here, however, while absolution is certainly related to the condition of ‘untruthfulness’ with finitude, it does not signify a superficial or purely formal release from what ought not to be, but a genuine release which is logically prior to the alienation of humankind.\footnote{In other words, because the very nature of the absolute idea includes the necessary movement of release, i.e. the absolution, of other-being, the freedom of humankind is not conditional upon their ‘sinfulness’ or alienation. Popular theism tends to suggest just the opposite, viz. that the finite individual has first the condition of alienation and that God’s ‘grace’ then releases him from this condition. Hegel inverts the order of this movement by already guaranteeing the release (the freedom) of the finite even prior to its condition of alienation. More rigorous Christian theism will accept this point insofar as the reconciliation of the divine and non-divine is included in the doctrine of kenosis: the death and resurrection of the incarnate divine (the unity of divine and non-divine) is ‘presupposed’ in the kenotic aspect of the ontological Trinity. Thus, it cannot be said that Hegel strays very far from a classical theistic position here, but he does more forcefully assert the fact that this release is a necessary aspect of divine activity.}

Nevertheless, a brief survey of Hegel’s account of natural humanity, i.e. the condition of alienation within his speculative redescription of the Christian narrative, will be useful here in order to demonstrate that while Hegel does provide a somewhat classical narrative of the ‘fall,’ the purpose of this is always to establish the freedom of spirit and world in and through a species of mutual immanence which guarantees the radical freedom of both. In other words, what we are concerned with here is the exposition of natural humanity and its transition into spiritual
existence, i.e. the movement from the alienated condition of humankind to its elevation into the ‘kingdom of heaven.’

In speaking of natural humanity Hegel remarks, “Human beings are evil by nature, i.e., they ought not to be the way they immediately are; hence they are they ought not to be.”\(^{225}\) The initial cleavage (the primal judgment, Urteil) between the divine and the non-divine bears witness to a state which ought not to be, i.e. to a condition which is directly contradictory to God who is truth as such. The nature of the finite world is to be precisely the opposite of the triune concept of being: it is the ἕτερον, the ‘other.’\(^{226}\) Thus, natural humanity embodies a contradiction: it is at one and the same time both that which is, that which has being and that which ought not to be. This contradiction is, according to Hegel, already contained within finite being at the very outset, although it is not yet explicit for finite being. What appears to the finite being first is the contradiction between good and evil which, for Hegel, is the first revelation of the division between the God and world, or between truth and untruth. Hegel’s reworking of what in classical Christian terms is referred to as the doctrine of original sin highlights the internal contradiction between the view, on the one hand, that humankind exists first in a state of innocence, i.e. a state of nature, and the view, on the other hand, that humankind is evil by nature. However, this contradiction is not merely a theoretical antagonism; rather, it reveals the internal contradiction already contained within humankind. In other words, the only reason we are able to recognize this contradiction from an external standpoint is because it is already present within finite being. It is not a posited contradiction but a revealed state of affairs.

The first aspect of the contradiction, i.e. that humankind exists first in state of innocence, means that it is initially pure desiring or sheer willing. That is to say, the human being is not yet a

\(^{225}\) LPR 3, 1824, E202 G134. Hegel echoes the same sentiment in the 1827 Lectures: “Precisely the natural being of humanity, lacking in consciousness and will, is what ought not to be.” LPR 3, 1827, E307 G230.

\(^{226}\) LPR 3, 1827, E293 G218.
human being; it is not a thinking being. We read: “Only through cognition does human being exist – because it exists only through knowledge and consciousness. Human will is not unconsciousness, it is not an instinct. But cognition and volition or consciousness are, generally speaking, the willing of evil just as much of the good.” It is important to note that Hegel does not conform to the view that prior to cognition, the human being is animalistic, i.e. governed by something akin to a pure instinct for survival; rather, the human being is human in potentia. Thus, the finite individual is neither animal nor human, and it is precisely this ambiguity which signifies a condition of innocence: good and evil are purely indeterminate because knowledge is not yet present. At the same time the contradiction between the natural state and the spiritual state is already present in the division between the natural will which essentially belongs to the world and the experience that finite being is what it ought not to be. To use Heideggerean language, finite being experiences the feeling of not being at home in the world. Georges Bataille aptly expresses this state of contradiction when he notes, “For the man who negates nature could not in any way live outside of it. He is not merely a man who negates Nature, he is first of all an animal, that is to say the very thing he negates: he cannot therefore negate Nature without negating himself.” What this signifies is that the finite being experiences a tension between what he is, i.e. between his recognition that he belongs to the natural state insofar as he has a natural will and the fact that he implicitly contains within him the call toward something higher, i.e. toward the spiritual state. However, to reach this higher state, i.e. toward becoming human, he must negate his own immediate nature.

It is fairly obvious that this account is the Hegelian redescription of the biblical myth of Adam and Eve who live in a state of ignorance in the garden of Eden. What Hegel emphasizes in

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227 LPR 3, Ms., E103 G39.
this account, however, is not the initial harmony between the divine and the non-divine prior to the original sin; rather, he focuses on the specific nature of the first ‘sin,’ i.e. eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is this action on the part of other-being that signifies at one and the same time its movement toward both the possibility of good (truth) and the possibility of evil (alienation, untruthfulness). It is this action which negates the negative nature of finite being; therefore, the presence of knowledge, of cognition, signifies the finite individual’s first gesture toward freedom. Hegel states,

(Moreover, the knowledge of good and evil is not evil on its own account – [this is] another inconsistency. The story is the eternal history of humanity. The deep insight of this story is that the eternal history of humanity, to be consciousness, is contained in it: (α) the original divine idea, the image [of God]; (β) the emergence of consciousness, knowledge of good and evil, (and at the same time responsibility; (γ) [the knowledge of good and evil emerges] as something that both ought not to be, i.e., it ought to remain as knowledge, and also as the means by which humanity is divine. Knowledge heals the wound that it itself is.229

(Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen ist ohnehin für sich nicht das Böse; weitere Inkonsequenz). Es ist die ewige Geschichte des Menschen. Und dies ist das Tiefe dieser Darstellung, daß die ewige Geschichte des Menschen, Bewußteint zu sein, darin enthalten ist: (α) ursprüngliche göttliche Idee, Ebenbild; (β) Eintreten des Bewußsteins; Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen, zugleich Schuld. (γ) Sowohl als etwas, das nicht sein soll, d.h. bleiben als Erkenntnis, als auch, wodurch der Mensch göttlich ist; Erkennen heilt die Wunde, die es selber ist.230

What Hegel means here is this: the myth of the fall contains within it the entire story of the development of consciousness because first, the concept of truth (God) is immediately present in it. This is precisely why finite being does not feel at home in the natural world in spite of her

229 LPR 3, Ms., E106 G42-43.
230 VPR 3, Ms., 42.
natural will which belongs to the natural world. The immediate intuition of God disrupts the harmony finite being might experience in the natural state. Finite being feels that she is not what she ought to be. Second, the internal contradiction just outlined is contained within finite being: she belongs to the natural realm (the state of innocence) yet also to the spiritual realm (the realm of freedom, responsibility, knowledge of good and evil). Goodness (truth) is implicit in the finite being which suggests that knowledge of good and evil is intrinsic to the human being so that she might pursue the good. Finally, it is by virtue of this internal contradiction that knowledge emerges: knowledge of truth (good) and untruth (evil) is the route toward both the damnation (estrangement from spirit) and salvation (reconciliation with spirit) of the human being. This is why Hegel states that ‘knowledge heals the wound that it itself is’: knowledge propels the human being toward the spiritual state wherein good and evil are intentional pursuits, i.e. they are conditioned by freedom rather than ignorance. Logically, this movement has the character of the negation of the negation: finite being is what she ought not to be; by negating this aspect of her being, she negates the negation contained in her so that she can move toward what she is, i.e. a spiritual human being.

The movement described here should be enough to advance the claim that the popular moralistic interpretation of original sin and absolution is simply not present in Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative. Much more radically, what Hegel articulates is the history of the development of consciousness as the development of the relation between the divine and the non-divine. Hence, the second stage of the development of consciousness is the spiritual state, i.e. the state in which natural finite being is spiritual human being (in which the human being has knowledge of good and evil, of truth and alienation. In the second stage – the spiritual state – Hegel notes, “God himself says: Behold, Adam has become like one of

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231 See: LPR 3, 1827, E297 G221.
In the spiritual state, the human being attains autonomous freedom; the human being is a thinking being with knowledge of good and evil. This kind of freedom is one that was previously reserved for the divine (according to the myth). However, the human being does not yet recognize her unity with the divine; she is not yet aware of the presence of spirit because the incarnate divine (the essential singularity) has not yet appeared in sensible shape. Consequently, the spiritual state is not fully established, i.e. it is not yet the realm of spirit, nor is the human being’s freedom concrete, i.e. it is still an abstract freedom. Thus, she initially exists in an antagonistic relationship with the divine: the human being has become ‘like’ God and sees herself ‘as’ God, but she is still bound to representational understanding and, in consequence, to an inadequate knowledge of the divine. This antagonism on the side of the non-divine toward the divine is the intentional rejection of God (truth); it is evil because it is the positing of the finite over and above the infinite; it is the intentional positing of falsity over truth.233

At the same time, it is precisely the knowledge of God and the experience of freedom which projects the human being toward the good (truth). The truth that the spiritual human being has implicit within her is identity with the divine. She is the being made in the image and likeness of God. However, because this identity with the divine is still only implicit, it is one-sided and incomplete. It is this contradiction which posits a state of rupture between recognizing the finite as the true while simultaneously recognizing it as what is false; this is the infinite anguish of humankind. We read, “Human beings are inwardly conscious that in their innermost being they are a contradiction, and have therefore an infinite anguish concerning themselves. Anguish is only present where there is opposition to what ought to be, to an affirmative. What is

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232 LPR 3, 1827, E302 G226.
233 This is one of the problems with Žižek’s comparison between the story of Job and the story of Christ; Job ultimately posits his own will over and above God’s. Christ clearly does not do this; in fact, Christ reverses this by subordinating his personal (finite) will to the divine will.
no longer itself an affirmative also has no contradiction, no anguish.”

Thus, the initial stages of human being both in the natural state and its transition toward the spiritual state is marked by contradiction and by the desperation which accompanies it.

However, the infinite anguish which accompanies specifically human alienation is at the same time precisely the possibility for infinite love. Thus, we can never read Hegel as saying that humankind is grounded only in alienation, untruthfulness, or anguish; rather, we must always keep together the concepts of infinite anguish and infinite love, for they are bound together insofar as infinite love is the positive, affirmative aspect which emerges from the rupture of infinite anguish. In other words, Hegel maintains the unity of anguish and love in the same way the death of Christ is always a death-and-resurrection. To speak only of the death of Christ, as Žižek does, without giving equal consideration to the resurrection, leaves the death of the incarnate divine one-sided. The same logical movement occurs in the realm of infinite anguish: the dualistic tension between truth (good) and untruth (evil) is what allows the syllogistic third term infinite love to emerge out of the state of rupture.

Thus, when Hodgson puts forward the claim that Hegel’s concept of absolute spirit should be understood according to the activity of absolution, what he means is that the radical freedom (genuine independence) of the human being is posited prior to his own development into freedom. In other words, God releases other-being in such a way that it creates a rupture within the individual who knows himself to share in the divine but at the same time knows

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234 LPR 3, 1827, E305 G229.
235 This is why Milbank sees Hegel as inheriting a Boehmian/Gnostic legacy: “In Boehme, the theses that creation is alienation and that evil has its origin in God belong together. Once Luther had expelled any notion of erotic, preferential love from his thoroughly unbiblical account of Agape, Eros could return within Protestantism only in a dark guise.” Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 195. What is anathema to Milbank is the notion that such a cleavage is possible under the protection of a generous, loving God. However, for Hegel, the problem always returns to the question of freedom: without rupture, without separation, without difference, radical freedom is purely illusory; it is always merely the semblance of freedom, a freedom posited not by the infinite, but by the finite. This is why tragedy is necessary aspect to the Hegelian theodicy; it is only out of infinite anguish that infinite love (which requires the unity of identity and difference) can emerge.
himself precisely as that which is other to the divine. This separation is never completely overcome insofar as Hegel emphatically avoids the happy conclusion wherein the human finds himself at one with the divine; in other words, the reconciliation between the divine and the non-divine is never an absorption into the divine. Instead, reconciliation born out of the infinite love of spirit maintains the otherness of other-being while simultaneously embracing it as its own. This is precisely the concept of the double ecstasis we find at work in Hegel’s ontotheology and which stems from a more mystical interpretation of the activity of spirit. In what follows, I will first turn to a more thorough examination of the double ecstasis: this is a crucial concept by which we can not only understand the reconciliatory movement of spirit such that it maintains a strict conception of spirit as unity in and through identity and difference, but which also supports the idea that Hegelian ontotheology concludes in theistic mutual immanence. In addition, I will address the role Eckhart plays in this interpretation in order to respond to the challenges presented by Žižek and Milbank concerning the relation (or non-relation) between Eckhart’s mysticism and Hegel’s ‘atheism.’

*The Double Ecstasis of God and World: Toward A Theory of Mutual Immanence*

The classic Christian view holds that the concept of ecstasis has to do with the absorption of the human being into the grace of God, or even more radically, into the being of God. In the moment of divine ecstasy, the human being becomes one with God in such a way that she gives herself up to the all-encompassing being of the divine. At the same time, it should be noted that in the moment of ecstasy, the human being does *not* lose herself or sacrifice her individual
personhood to God. Rather, her individual being is maintained, even accentuated, in its absorption into God’s being. This is because the ecstatic moment is one which makes the essential unity of the divine and the non-divine explicit. From the Eckhartian standpoint, the ecstatic moment makes true the statement, ‘I am God’. He writes, ‘If I am to know God without ‘means’ and without image or likeness, then God must become practically ‘I,’ and I practically God, so wholly one that when I work with Him it is not that I work and He incites me, but that I work wholly with what is mine.’

One of the most prevalent tensions we encounter in interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy of spirit concerns the primacy of spirit’s agency. More simply, the question lies in how Hegel conceives of the activity of spirit vis-à-vis the activity of the human community. Those who favor an interpretation which advances toward a theory of sheer immanence suggest that spirit, insofar as it is the community, is the active force of reconciliation. However, this interpretation has the disadvantage of collapsing the distinction between the divine and the non-divine. In other words, it leaves aside the essential aspect of distinction, i.e. of difference. Given that spirit is the unity of identity and difference, this interpretation is unsatisfying; however, the alternative which suggests the absolute primacy of spirit such that spirit remains transcendent according to a degenerative sense is equally problematic: it risks immanentizing the transcendent God of classical theism. Therefore, the problem lies in understanding how to interpret spirit such that the relation between spirit and community is neither dissolved nor reified.

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236 Hegel notes, “Accordingly, this sphere [of infinite love] [is] the kingdom of the Spirit. [It involves] knowing oneself as having within oneself, as this individual, infinite worth, absolute freedom, and the infinite power to maintain oneself in this other pure and simple.” LPR 3, Ms, E135 G71.

237 Meister Eckhart, The Complete Mystical Works (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2009), S. 41, 230. Here, we can even say that Eckhart privileges the finite individual over God in the ecstatic moment: in becoming practically ‘I,’ God becomes ‘mine’ rather than the alternative where God works through me. Clearly, selfhood is not lost in this event; instead, the self recovers its true nature, or, the fullness of its nature. This movement echoes Hegel’s idea that the human being in its immediate state (the natural state) is what it ought not to be: in moving toward a spiritual state (a state where God and the individual are reconciled), the human being becomes what he ought to be, i.e. divine in himself or the ‘son’ of God, to use Eckhartian language.
Eckhart’s mystical theology which includes within it the concept of the double ecstasis is useful in this respect: on the one hand, the non-divine is brought into an intimate relation with the divine such that the non-divine recognizes not only its origin within the divine, but also the fact that it shares in the essence of the divine. In other words, there is only one Being (spirit); the concept of ecstasis makes this explicit by eradicating the false dualism between being and other-being: insofar as both have the essential quality of existence, i.e. of being, they share in the same identity. Hence, there is no intrinsic difference between being and other-being. At the same time, this realization on the part of the non-divine does not collapse all difference between it and the divine. This is due to the second aspect of the double ecstasis in which the divine inhabits the non-divine. Stated differently, the former (the movement in which the non-divine realizes it shares in the divine essence) can be understood as ecstasis; the latter (the movement in which the divine inhabits the non-divine, i.e. makes itself concrete via the contingency of its historical development) can be understood as enstasis. In representational language, the concept of the double ecstasis includes the upward movement wherein the non-divine meets the divine and the downward movement wherein the divine resides within the non-divine. This is precisely the aspect of reciprocity in Hegelian ontotheology which is always implied by relationality. As Williams notes, for Hegel, “‘a one-sided relation is no relation at all.’”

The concept of double ecstasis can also be thought of with respect to the reciprocal movement inherent in spiritual (infinite) love. It is precisely via the reciprocity of infinite love that the identity and difference between the non-divine and the divine is established. Meister Eckhart, while using more theological language, expresses something similar. We read:

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St. John says, ‘See how great is the love that the Father has shown us, that we are called and are the children of God’ (I John 3:1). He says not only ‘we are called’ but ‘we are.’ So I say that just as a man cannot be wise without wisdom, so he cannot be a son without the filial nature of God’s Son, without having the same being as the Son of God has – just as being wise cannot be without wisdom. And so, if you are the Son of God, you can be so only by having the same being of God that the Son has.\(^{239}\)

It is clear here that Eckhart emphasizes the identity between the divine and the non-divine, but at the same time it should be noted that he does not say that the human being is identical to God (Father), but to the Son. What this implies is that there is a fundamental distinction between the first and second terms of the Trinity in spite of the Trinitarian relationality which posits the son (the externalization of the Father) as his direct reflection. In other words, although the Son embodies the first kenotic movement wherein the Father empties himself into the Son, i.e. the Word, the two terms retain their difference. The same logic is applied to the relation between the divine and the non-divine: although the non-divine is born out of the essential being of the divine, it nevertheless retains its own substantial being-in-itself.

The dynamic of love, therefore, occurs on two planes: first, we encounter the notion that love is precisely the relation between the first and second terms of the ontological Trinity, i.e. spirit. The Father empties himself into his Son who reflects back the Father’s essential being so that the Father recognizes himself in and through the other. At the economic level, the divine empties itself into finitude which reflects back his essential being so that he becomes concrete, i.e. absolute spirit. This is the eternal play of love in spirit. This is why Hegel states, “In friendship and love I give up my abstract personality and thereby win it back as concrete. The truth of personality is found precisely in winning it back through this immersion, this being

immersed in the other.”

What is crucial here is not only the relation between the divine and the non-divine wherein the non-divine is brought into unity with the divine through the movement of double ecstasis; equally, it is this movement which secures the concrete personality of God as well as the concrete personality of the human being, for without the immersion into other-being the divine and the non-divine remain abstract. For Hegel, the abstractness of God signifies a species of tritheism which can only conclude in either disjointed non-relational entities (the three persons of the Trinity are ‘substantial’ in themselves) or as a disguised monism where each person of the Trinity is merely an aspect of the one abstract divine.

This is why Williams remarks, “If the Trinitarian persons are not absolute unities or being-for-self, but taken as mere transient moments or aspects of God, the result is not the classical Trinity, but monarchial modalism.”

Hence, the Hegelian Trinitarian schema must be approached as the paradoxical unity of identity and difference.

At the same time, it is not just that spirit becomes concrete in the double ecstasis; I have already suggested that the non-divine also undergoes a change wherein it affirms its full personality. In other words, the view I advance here is that Hegel’s philosophico-theological enterprise does not concern itself solely with the development of spirit such that at the conclusion of Christian narrative, spirit is the only site of development. Rather, the non-divine is radically altered; it is transfigured into the ‘kingdom of God.’ We read:

Since what is at issue is the consciousness of absolute reconciliation, we are here in the presence of a new consciousness of humanity, or a new religion. Through it a new world

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240 LPR 3, 1827, E286 G211.
242 Ibid., 253.
is constituted, a new actuality, a different world-condition, because [humanity’s] outward determinate being, [its] natural existence, now has religion as its substantiality.  

Indem es um das Bewußstein der absoluten Versöhnung zu tun ist, ist hier ein neues Bewußstein der Menschen, eine neue Religion vorhanden. Dadurch ist bedingt eine neue Welt, eine neue Wirklichkeit, ein anderer Weltzustand; denn das äußere Dasein, die natürliche Existenz hat zu ihrer Substantialität die Religion.

This is a striking passage, for it indicates that spirit does not just inhabit the community or take part in the creation of the community, but instead that the very actuality of spirit within the community fundamentally alters reality as such. Hegel is even more explicit when he notes, “The kingdom of God, the new religion, thus contains implicitly the characteristic of negating the present world.” To be sure Hegel’s notion of the kingdom of God is still understood as a future event, which is why in spite of its present actuality it still carries with it the negative characteristic. He clarifies this point in the 1824 Lectures where he states,

The community raises itself to heaven as well. So it is a present that raises itself, it is essentially reconciled, brought to consummation through the negation of its immediacy, consummated in universality, but in a consummation that is not yet achieved, and which must therefore be grasped as future – a now of the present that has consummation before its eyes; but because the community is posited now in the other of time, the consummation is distinguished from this ‘now’ and is posited as future.

Thus, we cannot take the transfiguration of the community into the kingdom of God to mean that it appears this way for humankind, but only because humankind still resides in time, i.e. in finitude. The underlying truth of the finite realm, however, is that this transfiguration has already occurred, i.e. in the past as the second moment of divine history (the incarnate divine).

244 VPR 3, 241.
245 LPR 3, 1824, E188 G121.
Consequently, it is present: the community is the kingdom of God, i.e. the radically altered locale of spirit. But, this is only a “limited present, not the eternal present as such but the present that distinguishes past and future from itself.” The reconciliation between the divine and the non-divine has occurred and is occurring; the realm of finitude has undergone its transformation into the kingdom of God, but because finitude is still bound by time (past, present, and future), it is not fully aware of this truth. This is why the realm of spirit still contains within it an aspect of negativity, i.e. the negation of this present world, i.e. finite empirical reality.

To Become No-thing: Eckhart and Hegel on Identity and Difference

We still need to examine how exactly the double ecstasis is enacted on the side of the non-divine, for it is with respect to this concept that Hegel’s and Eckhart’s theologies significantly overlap. More specifically, it is through the spiritual death to the finite, i.e. self-abnegation or self-divestment, that the non-divine enters into a relation with the divine. Eckhart scholars have referred to this movement as ‘detachment’ or ‘unattachment’ (Gelassenheit) and also as ‘self-abandonment’ (abgeschiedenheit); however, for our purposes, ‘self-abnegation’ or ‘self-divestment’ works equally well. In Eckhart, we read:

Since it is God’s nature to be like anyone, we have to come to a state of being nothing in order to enter into the same nature that He is. So, when I am able to establish myself in Nothing and Nothing in myself, uprooting and casting out what is in me, then I can pass into the naked being of God, which is the naked being of the spirit.

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246 LPR 3, 1824, E188 G121.
247 Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 7, 74.
There are several important claims occurring in this passage. First, as I have already mentioned in the introduction, Eckhart is a *speculative* mystic rather than a visionary mystic; in other words, Eckhart fully embraces the notion that human being can have genuine knowledge of God. At the same time it should be noted that Eckhart presents an apophatic theology, i.e. God is radically absent, whereas Hegelian theology is fully kataphatic, i.e. spirit is completely revealed. Nevertheless, both embrace the view that God (the Trinity in-itself) can be grasped via speculative reason.248

Second, both abhor representational imagery and language as a means by which to conceptualize the divine; this is precisely why Eckhart states that ‘God’s nature is not to be like anything.’ Any concept which makes use of a comparative term is automatically problematic, for it suggests that the one simple essence, i.e. the absolute divine, can be grasped according to something non-divine, i.e. in relation to otherness.249 For both Hegel and Eckhart, the divine always overreaches the non-divine in the fullness of its concept. This is precisely why Hegel notes that the Trinity is a mystery for representational understanding: insofar as it seeks to comprehend the concept of three-in-one via number, it fails to grasp the underlying paradoxical truth that the Trinity is an eternal play of relations.250 We find the same sentiment expressed in

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248 Eckhart is especially clear on this point: when he states that God is available for the intellect, he does not mean the ‘concept’ of God is available, he means God in himself is present to the intellect. “God makes us knowing Him, and His being is His knowing, and His making me know is the same as my knowing; so His knowing is mine just as in the master; what he teaches is one and the same as, in the pupil, what is taught.” Eckhart, *Mystical Works*, S. 7, 74.

249 This may appear paradoxical, for Hegelian dialectical logic clearly requires the immersion into otherness in order for spirit to become concrete; however, we must remember that this otherness is precisely not an aspect of the divine prior to reconciliation. Negative being subsists in opposition to the divine being (other-being is antithetical to being). This schema must be upheld or else the divine and the non-divine, being and non-being, collapse into self-sameness. Instead, Hegel believes he has resolved this problem by noting that the non-divine (other-being, negativity) is a vanishing moment of the divine. Thus, to speak of the divine by comparing it to its other, i.e. to the non-divine, is symptomatic of representational understanding which fetishizes the concept of God. If, however, the divine is understood via a specifically speculative relation to the non-divine, wherein they interact with one another in order to achieve concrete subjectivity, then we can grasp the divine via the non-divine, but this is never a comparative proposition; it is always a dialectical formulation.

250 *LPR* 3, 1824, E192-193, G126-127.
Eckhart, “This [human] spirit must transcend number and break through multiplicity, and God will break through him; and just as He breaks through into me, so I break through in turn into Him.” This is precisely why Eckhart characterizes God as Nothing, i.e. as no-thing. And yet, at the same time, this no-thing for Eckhart is very clearly a something: God is not the pure void or the sheer abyss from which finite existence emerges. If Eckhart is to be understood as a theologian of the creatio ex nihilo model, as Milbank claims, then God is emphatically not the nihilo but is the force which posits the nihilo according to the classical theistic formula. In other words, God is the being which is no-thing which actively posits otherness (creation) within itself. What this suggests, on the side of finitude, is that the human being must become a no-thing in order to enter into the ecstatic relation with the divine, i.e. in order to realize its unity with the divine.

How does the non-divine become a no-thing, especially if we consider that it is already a nothing insofar as it is defined in and through its character of ‘other-being’? Eckhart in a logical move that precedes Hegel, negates the negation. The formulation can be expressed thus: human being is not a no-thing (a term which indicates uniqueness rather than non-identity) because it is a particular something (it is defined by its externality, i.e. by its limits). By virtue of its particularity which it takes as its essence, finite being subsists in a state of untruth (in Eckhartian language, a state of attachment; in Hegelian terms, a condition of alienation); for this reason,

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251 Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 16, 124-125.
252 Some may object that Hegelian spirit posits other-being within itself whereas the traditional theistic model holds that the divine posits other-being outside itself. Creation is radically different from the divine; however, Eckhart notes in several places throughout his sermons that creation belongs to the divine and shares in the same nature as the divine: “But between man and God there is nothing foreign or aloof, and therefore man is not ‘like him’ but is altogether identical with Him and the very same as He is.” Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 49, 264. To say that the non-divine sphere is radically independent of the divine is not the same as saying that they are essentially different and this is the crucial point: the freedom of the human being, rather than being the cause of the separation between the divine and the non-divine, is in fact always the revelation of their unity. Genuine freedom (the radical freedom granted by the divine) is precisely that which throws the human being onto herself so that she comes to realize that the freedom afforded by finitude (a liberalistic freedom) is ultimately false, i.e. filled with contradictions and inconsistencies.
human being is in fact nothing because it does not explicitly recognize the source of its being. In other words, human being, insofar as it takes its condition of otherness to be its essence, is ‘empty’ of actual being.\(^{253}\) “You must be free of nothing [nicht]. I say truly, insofar as not adheres to you, to that extent you are imperfect. Therefore, if you want to be perfect, you must be rid of not.”\(^ {254}\) It is precisely this negative characterization of the something that is in fact nothing (the not) which must be negated; this is accomplished by becoming a no-thing which is, paradoxically, genuine (singular) being. This is what Eckhart means when he states that the human being must establish the nothing within herself, that she must come to a state of being nothing.

In Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative, we find a parallel movement in the death of the incarnate divine: the death of God is the death of death.\(^ {255}\)

The truth to which human beings have attained by means of this history, what they have become conscious of in this entire history, is the following: that the idea of God has certainty for them, that humanity has attained the certainty of unity with God, that the

\(^{253}\) The movement expressed here is one of the reasons a variety of scholars have drawn a connection between Eckhartinian mystical philosophy and Buddhist philosophy. Both endorse of theory of un-attachment from the transient or superficial world of particular ‘things’. From the Buddhist perspective, attachment is the source of all suffering; the more one releases oneself from what is only fleeting or impermanent, the greater chance one has of experiencing enlightenment. See: The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, translation and commentary by Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 202-206; 225-230. For Eckhart too, attachment to finitude is the source of suffering (the source of evil); however, the primary difference here is that Eckhart remains theistic insofar as his theology relies on the view that the divine has an eternal essence. Buddhist ontology, by contrast, argues that there is no permanent or immutable essence, no ‘thing-in-itself’ underlying appearances. Hegel, for his part, is aware of the Buddhist principle of detachment. He notes in the LPR 2, “The highest point in this cultus is the state of being dead to the world, the making of this inward immobility of self into one’s character or one’s fixed principle.” LPR 2, 1827, E596, G491. For Hegel, this form of un-attachment is an abstract death to the world – it is the attempt to be pure being-with-self. Ethical bonds, trust, love, compassion, etc. are all left aside in favor of a fundamental indifference to the world of human beings (in spite of the Buddhist principle of compassion). In contrast, Hegel believes his account of Christianity seeks out not an abstract death of self, but a death which makes the self explicit to itself, i.e. which makes explicit to the individual what she ought to be. This is why Hegel’s account of the development of the self with respect to the Christian narrative must always be understood not only as a spiritual death (the negation of what ought not to be), but equally a resurrection (a transfiguration into what one is).

\(^{254}\) Eckhart, Mystical Works, S. 13, 109.

\(^{255}\) LPR 3, 1827, E324 G247.
human is the immediately present God. Indeed, within this history as spirit comprehends it, there is the very presentation of the process of what humanity, what spirit is – implicitly both God and dead.256

This passage suggests first, that upon the death of God, God is no longer merely a concept but an actual being; thought and existence share perfect correspondence in the object. Second, it advances the view that the ‘human being is the immediately present God,’ a statement which undoubtedly leads to a variety of interpretations depending upon one’s commitment to a theistic or atheistic narrative. It is my view that this statement does not signify a species of transubstantiation, wherein the human being is merely the physical and intellectual site of spirit (spirit ‘occupies’ the human being or the human is a ‘vessel’ for spirit). Such a view undermines the autonomy and singular subjectivity of the human being. Nor, however, does this statement signify a realization on the part of the human being that he is God (that the great secret of the divine is that it does not exist, i.e. that it is merely human). This interpretation leads to the kind of crude pantheism Hegel explicitly rejects while also characterizing the entire Christian narrative as an elaborate myth which serves only to show us that we were complicit in creating the illusion it presented (a somewhat Žižekian view). Nor, finally, does this statement suggest that the human being has become God; the human being has replaced the abstract God with something that conforms better to material existence, i.e. the human. This view fails to take into account the second aspect of the death of God, i.e. the resurrection wherein the triune God is genuinely resurrected (not simply transformed into the human). Instead, the statement that the ‘human being is the immediately present God,’ means that the relation between the divine and

256 LPR 3, 1827, E326 G250.
the non-divine is no longer mediated by finitude; instead, it takes place within the infinite.\textsuperscript{257} Hence, the distinction between the divine and the non-divine is not lost; instead, their existential relation is transposed into a higher unity.

The third line of this passage supports this interpretation: the movement being considered here is taken up “as spirit comprehends it.” Spirit knows itself as it is: “implicitly both God and dead.” What this suggests is that this history is not comprehended from the standpoint of finite being, but rather from the speculative grasp of the spiritual being who subsists in unity with the divine, i.e. the religious community. The speculative insight is that spirit is both God and dead. For Hegel, this means that spirit has within itself the highest extremes of finitude (death) and the infinite (God). In other words, the religious community is precisely the site of the unity of the finite and the infinite. This does not, however, suggest that the religious community is God; rather, it comprehends itself as belonging to God as much as it belongs to the finite. Hegel clearly articulates this point on the following page:

This is the explication of the reconciliation: that God has reconciled with the world, or rather that God has shown himself to be reconciled with the world, that even the human is not something alien to him, but rather that this otherness, this self-distinguishing, finitude as it is expressed, is a moment in God himself, although, to be sure, a disappearing moment.\textsuperscript{258}

\textsuperscript{257} Again, we must be careful to note that while the relation itself belongs to the infinite, i.e. to the ‘higher sphere,’ the ‘kingdom of heaven,’ the religious community is still bound to temporality. Hegel notes, “The infinite demand to see God, i.e. to become conscious in the Spirit of his truth as a present reality, is not possible in this temporal present for the consciousness that intuists sensibly and is representational.” \textit{LPR 3}, Ms., E138 G74, emphasis added. Speculative reasoning, of course, can grasp the truth of spirit, but even in the community, the human being is still bound to representational understanding and therefore only partially grasp the truth of spirit. This is why the kingdom of God, in spite of the concrete presence of spirit in the realm of finitude, is still grasped as a future event.\textsuperscript{258} \textit{LPR 3}, 1827, E327 G250.
The establishment of the community of spirit indicates a fundamental certainty on the part of the non-divine that it essentially belongs to the divine. The estrangement between the divine and the non-divine is overcome.

Nevertheless, the release from the human condition of alienation, while taking place within spirit, i.e. spirit effects this reconciliation, is not entirely one-sided. The aspect of human self-divestment is also significant: as I have already noted, Hegel states that spirit knows itself implicitly as what it is – both God and dead. As I have suggested, this can be understood according to the first sense, viz. that the God is the highest expression of the infinite and that death is the highest expression of finitude; however, there is also a second sense through which we can interpret this relation. Hegel notes that the highest affirmative moment of the divine is at the same time its highest negative moment: through death, the divine takes on the highest expression of other-being, of that which is alien to it. At the same time, through the resurrection (which indicates the necessity of this death), the divine affirms itself as divine, i.e. only the divine is able to overcome death. From the standpoint of the non-divine, which shares in the essential being of the divine (which participates in the negation and affirmation of the divine) this signifies the following: in order to be like God, i.e. in order to enter into an active and not merely passive unity with the divine, the human being must negate his finitude. We have already encountered this movement in the first transition from natural humanity to spiritual humanity wherein finite being negates one aspect of his finitude in order to become a thinking being. In the myth of Adam and Eve, this negation is represented as eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

However, the transition from spiritual being which still resides in a condition of alienation to the spiritual being who is spirit, i.e. the religious community, requires another
transition. In the passages preceding the death-and-resurrection of the incarnate divine, Hegel emphasizes the teachings of Christ. He states,

Humanity [must] prepare this soil for itself inwardly. [This is] an elevation into a quite other and higher sphere. The universal soil is the heavenly kingdom, the kingdom of God – a substantial, intelligible world in which all values that are sought in earthly, mundane things are cast away.\(^{259}\)

There are several aspects of this passage worth highlighting. First, while Hegel remarks that the soil upon which the heavenly kingdom is founded is internal, i.e. within the human being, he also states that it is an elevation into ‘a quite other and higher sphere.’ Thus, we should not take Hegel to mean that the kingdom of heaven is merely contained within the individual, that the appearance of the incarnate divine is enough to posit the kingdom of God within the spiritual being. Rather, the spiritual being must prepare this soil; she must actively receive the heavenly kingdom within herself. In other words, the spiritual being undergoes a second negation wherein the things that attach her to finitude are ‘cast away.’ Hegel remarks, “This is a vocation, a life, that is removed from time and temporality, [existing] for itself, and since it [is] also opposed to temporality, this eternal vocation is defined as a future of immortality.”\(^{260}\) Not only have we seen that for Hegel although the kingdom of God (the concrete presence of spirit) is actual, it is nevertheless grasped as a future event because human being is still tied to representational consciousness, but we also see that Hegel defines this exercise to see God, to become conscious of the presence of spirit in the community, is a vocation, a work. While Hegel posits the presence of spirit as an accomplished fact of which the religious community has certainty from the

\(^{259}\) LPR 3, Ms., E116 G50-51.
\(^{260}\) LPR 3, Ms., E138 G74, emphasis added.
speculative point of view, it nevertheless is not fully grasped by representational consciousness. Hence, there is still some form of inconsistency/contradiction within the religious community.

In the 1827 Lectures, Hegel takes a different tack to explain much the same thing:

This difference is removed, and its removal happens because God looks into the human heart, he regards the substantial will, the innermost, all-encompassing subjectivity of the human being, one’s inner, true, and earnest willing. But apart from this inner will, and distinct from this inner, substantial actuality, there is still the external and deficient side of humanity; we commit errors; we can exist in a way that is not appropriate to this inward, substantial essentiality, this substantial, essential inwardsness.261

In spite of the concrete actuality of spirit in finitude, the spiritual human being retains this fundamental division. Thus, Hegel does not present us with an achieved theodicy wherein every division and distinction between the divine and the non-divine is resolved; instead, he posits the necessity of an eternal striving toward the divine, a striving toward the recognition that the divine is present in the present here-and-now not in the beyond.

This vocation which belongs to the religious community indicates a need for continuous self-abnegation or un-attachment; the self-divestment (the emptying) of the finite human being of her finitude (of her particularity) is not achieved once and for all, but is a work. This is how the Hegelian narrative of spirit reveals a genuine participatory theology. Participation in the divine at the level of the religious or spiritual community which it itself genuinely transfigured nevertheless requires the self-divestment of particularity on the side of the non-divine. Again, Eckhart is useful in this respect: he maintains that God must be a concrete presence in the life of the spiritual being such that the individual does not know God via representation or image, but as essential being. This is why he states,

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261 LPR 3, 1827, E332 G255.
This true possession of God depends on the mind, an inner mental turning and striving toward God – but not in a continuous and equal thinking of Him, for that would be impossible for nature to strive for, very difficult and not the best thing. A man should note have, or be satisfied with, an imagined God, for then, when the idea vanishes, God vanishes! Rather, one should have an essential God, who far transcends the thought of man and all creatures. Such a God never vanishes unless a man willfully turns away from Him.  

As we see, the striving toward God of which Eckhart speaks is not a superficial striving, nor is it an ascetic practice; rather, it is the simple acknowledgement of truth. Un-attachment, which is an aspect of this striving, cannot therefore be thought of a form of asceticism, a ‘monkish’ retreat from worldly things. Both Eckhart and Hegel adamantly reject this view of self-abnegation; instead, the ‘inward retreat’ always suggests an intellectual or speculative retreat – a withdrawal into a deeper insight concerning the nature of reality as provided by speculative knowing.

The retreat into speculative knowing can alternatively be thought of as a spiritual ‘death’ to finitude. In other words, rather than adhering the representational formula of undergoing biological death in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven, the spiritual death takes place in a release from the particularity (the negativity) which superficially defines human being. The idea of spiritual self-divestment is already developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done it, turn away and pass onto something else; on

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the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the fact, and tarrying with it.  

The language is particularly evocative here: spiritual being only encounters the truth of spirit in death, in the highest expression of finitude. It is in ‘tarrying with death’ in and through life that the spiritual being wins the truth of her identity with the divine. Therefore, any conception of self-abnegation or self-divestment as an ascetic practice or a withdrawal into self (into pure interiority) reduces the active, autonomous element on the side of spiritual being in its engagement with spirit. In the Hegelian logic of absolute spirit, it is clear that pure interiority is indicative of a fundamental passivity; contrary to this interpretation, spiritual being maintains an active relation with spirit as the truth which emerges from a spiritual death (self-abnegation) which is, at the same time, a striving toward the divine. This is why Milbank’s reading that Hegelian ontotheology betrays a commitment to Protestant interiority does not correspond to what Hegel in fact articulates. The goal of the divine is never merely to inhabit the human being as the internal presence of spirit; instead, the aim of spirit with respect to the spiritual being is always to provide the opportunity and conditions necessary to establish a genuine, active relation. This is why Christianity is the revealed religion: spirit eternally reveals itself as the possibility of acknowledging, establishing, and maintaining a concrete relation with the divine.

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In the preceding section, I have advanced the view that Christianity is the revealed religion not only because it makes the divine known, but also because it eternally posits the possibility of acknowledging the intrinsic relation between the divine and the non-divine. In other words, spirit is the ever-present possibility of recognizing oneself as divine. This is precisely the kind of statement that has led commentators to argue that Hegel presents us with an account which embraces the transcendence (the concreteness) of the spiritual being while immanentizing (if not outright negating) the divine. We have already encountered a similar proposition in Hegel’s statement that ‘the human is the immediately present God.’ In Žižek’s essay, we read the following:

What is sublated in the move from the Son to the Holy Spirit is thus God himself: after the Crucifixion, the death of God incarnate, the universal God returns as a Spirit of the community of believers, i.e. he is the one who passes from a transcendent substantial Reality to a virtual/ideal entity which exists only as the ‘presupposition’ of acting individuals.\(^{264}\)

There are several aspects of this narrative concerning the death-and-resurrection of the divine which do not quite correspond to Hegel’s own position. To be sure, his survey of the dialectical movement of the Son to the Holy Spirit which is both the negation and affirmation of the universal God is correct; however, the conclusion he draws from this runs counter to Hegel’s own exposition of the religious community. First, Žižek fails to emphasize here that insofar as all three substantial modalities of the Trinity die, so are all three resurrected. The resurrection of the

divine in the speculative redescription of the Christian narrative is not concentrated on one
modality; rather, it necessarily applies to all three or else the concept of the triune God falls
apart, i.e. we are left with either a regressive tritheism or a disguised substance monism. Neither
position incorporates the fact that the modalities of the Trinity constitute concrete personality.
Thus, the view that the dialectical unfolding of absolute spirit moves from the Father to the Son
to the Holy Spirit in a linear progression where spirit is the final synthesis of the first two terms
is somewhat reductive. In the Lecture Manuscript, we read:

That these of themselves infinite ones, which are indeed essentially exclusive – a plurality
of such ones – [are still] to be grasped only as one, [appears to be] the most stark
contradiction. But in any case, as we [noted] earlier, the divine idea is not just this
contradiction but also the resolution of it – a resolution in the sense not that the
contradiction is not [present] but rather that it is to be overcome.265

The contradiction is overcome, to be sure, but just this suggests that we do not end with a
plurality of ones nor only a one; rather, the result is the absolute concrete personality of spirit
which maintains the paradox of three-and-one. The second aspect of Žižek’s statement, i.e. that
spirit ‘is the one who passes from a transcendent substantial Reality to a virtual/ideal entity
which exists only as the ‘presupposition’ of acting individuals’ is equally problematic from this
point of view. What Žižek is suggesting is a reformulation of the Kantian transcendental idea
where, rather than presupposing transcendent divine, the religious community presupposes the
presence of the divine within the finite. Even further, Žižek conflates the religious community
and spirit such that the community is precisely the formal presupposition which informs the
activity of humankind. “It is, on the contrary, the divine Substance itself (God as a Thing-in-
Itself) which is sublated: negated, but simultaneously maintained in the transubstantiated form of

265 LPR 3, Ms., E82-83 G20, emphasis added.
the Holy Spirit, the community of believers which exists only as the virtual presupposition of the activity of finite individuals.”  

Žižek takes precisely this to be the concrete aspect of the Hegelian logic of spirit, but he only does so because for him the concrete cannot include anything divine. This is due to the fact that Žižek cannot envision any form of transcendence other than the degenerative kind where God is the ‘Big Other.’ However, ridding ourselves of the idol of the ‘Big Other’ does not thereby rid us of the divine, nor does it suggest that the divine cannot be distinct, even transcendent, without reducing the non-divine to mere predicates of the divine.

Žižek is quite right when he states, “The standard perception of Hegel as an organicist holist who thinks that really existing individuals are just ‘predicates’ of some ‘higher’ substantial Whole, epiphenomena of the Spirit as a mega-Subject who effectively runs the show, totally misses this crucial point.”  

It is certainly the case that Hegel is not restoring precisely the monarchical divine in-itself of popular Christian theism. At the same time, the refusal to subordinate the non-divine to the divine does not imply a need to cancel out the very divinity of the divine – the Hegelian logic of absolute spirit includes a moment wherein the divinity of the divine is negated, but this is only a ‘vanishing’ moment which the divine includes in itself; it is therefore sublated. In addition, Žižek fails to see that the transubstantiation of spirit is not that of an individual divine (as though the other two modalities, Father and Son, simply disappear; instead, Father and Son are preserved not metaphorically, but in actuality. This does not imply that spirit is a ‘mega-Subject’ who controls both the finite and infinite spheres: this is emphatically not the goal of Hegelian ontotheology nor, incidentally, is it indicative of the understanding of the role of the divine within classical Christian theism. Instead, according to the

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266 Žižek, Monstrosity of Christ, 61.
267 Ibid., 61.
Hegelian narrative it is precisely because the infinite extends beyond the finite that the non-divine enjoys absolute freedom. It is only because Žižek cannot conceive of something which overreaches finite being without automatically associating it with some version of authoritarianism (the sovereign lord, the benevolent monarch, the moral judge, etc.) that he attempts to attribute to Hegel precisely the opposite of what Hegel actually says.

This brings us to the second aspect of Žižek’s reinterpretation of Hegelian spirit, viz. his positive account. Žižek advances the view that Hegel’s speculative reinterpretation of the Christian narrative leads toward a materialist theology of the ‘non-all.’ Žižek states, “If, however, we assert a nonpredicate and say ‘material reality is non-all,’ this merely asserts the non-all of reality without implying any exception – paradoxically, we should thus claim that ‘material reality is non-all,’ not ‘material reality is all there is,’ is the truth formula of materialism.” What Žižek advances here, in the guise of a more complicated metaphysical logic, is a western version of Buddhist ontology. The ultimate point is that behind the appearance there is no thing-in-itself: material reality is all there is because it is equally all that is not. Rather than conforming to the western metaphysical view which posits a ‘higher’ level of reality which seeks to assert itself as ‘more real’ than reality, Žižek favors the inversion which comes from an eastern metaphysical view: the ‘higher’ level of reality is only higher because it reveals the fundamental emptiness of all reality. This nevertheless perpetuates a dualism: the very positing of the non-all requires the positive (truthful) assertion that reality is negative, which if taken up as its essential condition, negates the assertion itself. All we are left with is either an

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268 Ibid., 95.
269 This is one of the most frequently debated problems in Buddhist metaphysics: the ‘higher’ level asserts that the truth of material existence is that it is both ‘real’ yet fundamentally empty of essence; however, insofar as this ‘higher’ level posits truth in itself, it is not genuinely ‘empty’ of essence (it has the essential character of emptiness, a claim which has the status of truth). Thus, it appears to contradict itself because it posits an essential truth which denies its own validity as truth. See: Matthew T. Kapstein, “Mipam Namgyel: The Lion’s Roar Affirming Extrinsic Emptiness,” Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings, edited by William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 61-72.
infinite series of empty appearances which are, paradoxically, both ‘real’ (even ‘more real than reality’) and non-real insofar as the very concept of reality is destabilized; or, we affirm a contradiction in saying that nothing is true except that nothing is true.\textsuperscript{270} The latter is clearly problematic while the former falls prey to a long-standing history of metaphysical problems within the Buddhist philosophical tradition. Yet, Žižek maintains that, “a truly radical materialism is nonreductionist: far from claiming that ‘everything is matter,’ it confers upon ‘immaterial’ phenomena a specific positive nonbeing.”\textsuperscript{271} Žižek’s ‘materialism’ is not particularly radical if viewed from the lens non-western metaphysics; however, the point here is that the Hegelian dialectical logic of absolute spirit does not lead to his ‘conferring upon immaterial phenomena specific positive non-being’ unless we reverse Žižek’s inversion and note that, for Hegel, it is precisely the fullness of specific positive \textit{being} (the singular being of spirit) which releases material being from its non-being.\textsuperscript{272}

In contrast to the Žižekian account which leads to a materialist nihilism, we can understand the divinization of the spiritual being in conjunction with the genuine transcendence of the divine. I have already alluded to the notion that there are two kinds of transcendence at work in a philosophico-theological inquiry into the nature of the divine: the first is the

\textsuperscript{270} Žižek, \textit{Monstrosity of Christ}, 95. According to Žižek, the notion that appearances in their very emptiness are more real than reality displays an ‘ontological fuzziness’ which allows us to invert monotheistic logic in order to assert its fundamental truth which is atheism. It is this which leads Žižek to state, “Materialism has nothing to do with the inert density of matter; it is, on the contrary, a position which accepts the ultimate void of reality – the consequence of its central thesis on the primordial multiplicity is that there is no ‘substantial reality,’ that the only ‘substance’ of the multiplicity is void.” Ibid., 97. And again, “There is no Beyond of Being which inscribes itself into the order of Being – there is nothing but the order of Being.” Ibid., 99.

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{272} Again, the difficulty with respect to the sensible shape of spirit has to do with the temporality of finitude: insofar as we are determined by temporality, we grasp the shape of spirit according to past, present and future. But, for Hegel, this misses the point: from the standpoint of spirit, spirit is still in the here-and-now, and the movement of the Christian narrative which \textit{is} the movement of absolute spirit does not take place as past, present and future – it only \textit{appears} to us as such. Thus, Žižek’s interpretation of the Hegelian logic of spirit still makes us of temporality in a way that, for Hegel, does not express the fullness of the concept. By advancing the view that spirit ‘culminates’ in immateriality which, in turn, reveals the positive non-being of immateriality, Žižek’s position makes use of temporal categories which betray a representational rather than a speculative understanding of spirit.
classical/popular theistic position wherein the transcendence of the divine is representationally grasped as the ‘Big Other,’ the sovereign lord, the Creator, or the God who subsists in a beyond. The common definition of transcendence here is that the divine (the infinite) is immutable, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. What it also advances is the view that the divine (the infinite) is not reducible in any way to the non-divine (the finite). Thus, the transcendent divine is not conditioned by any external necessity. This version of transcendence is clearly problematic: it suggests that an anthropomorphic being resides outside the realm of finitude and involves himself at will in the lives and actions of his creation. This is precisely the God of the Old Testament who made a bet with the devil to see if Job would remain faithful under duress. Cyril O’Regan refers to this as a ‘degenerative’ transcendence, for it posits a God who is not truly transcendent insofar as he is defined as a whimsical, arbitrary, non-rational divine.273

However, there is a second sense of transcendence which better conforms to the kind of transcendence at work in Hegel’s concept of the divine. I refer to this as a ‘full’ or ‘genuine’ transcendence, for what it implies is a divine being that is not conditioned by external necessity while nevertheless admitting the presence of internal necessity. This does not jeopardize the status of the divine being (the Trinity); rather, it affirms it because it suggests that transcendence is achieved via its dialectic unfolding rather than presupposed. In *Heterodox Hegel*, we read:

> On the interpretation offered here it is indeed true that it is in the ‘Immanent’ [ontological] Trinity that we discover the true locus of transcendence. But it is only in the ‘Immanent Trinity’ in its analeptic modality that transcendence in the full and proper sense is found. Undoubtedly, a kind of transcendence characterizes the ‘Immanent Trinity’ even in its proleptic mode. At the very least, it is irreducible to the finite, and,  

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moreover, it subserves the positive functions of establishing divinity as the ultimate grammatical subject of Hegelian ontotheology and being the ultimate condition of the constitution of realizes subjectivity or personhood achieved in the ‘Immanent Trinity’ in its analeptic modality.”

O’Regan uses the terms ‘proleptic’ and ‘analeptic’ to signify the intrinsic potentiality of divine transcendence on the one hand and the actualization of full transcendence upon the transfiguration of the divine on the other hand. This analytic pair corresponds to Hegel’s implicit (an sich) and explicit (für sich). In Hegelian terms, therefore, the actualization of the full transcendence of the divine is implicit in the dialectical development of spirit; it becomes explicit when spirit moves from Substance to Subject. Hence, the immanent or ontological Trinity is transcendent in this sense that it contains within itself the implicit actuality of full transcendence. By becoming concrete, spirit then achieves this full transcendence which is “all of which is layered in the last or final constitution of the self.”

The notion that divine transcendence is proleptically ensured and analeptically guaranteed corresponds to the view that the divine implicitly contains within itself the achievement of its own personhood (personality) which is then made explicit when the unity between the divine and the non-divine is established. This interpretation has the following consequences: rather than immanentizing spirit such that its singular subjectivity is conflated with the religious community (which ultimately signifies a reduction of genuine subjectivity since the freedom of the divine is collapsed into the activity of the spiritual community), this upholds the autonomous and independent singular subjectivity of the divine. In other words, we do not risk creating a false hierarchy where, in an atheistic countermeasure against the sovereignty of the divine, the spiritual community is given divine status while the divine is

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274 Ibid., 296.
275 Ibid., 11.
granted no status at all. Nor, however, do we perpetuate the notion that the transcendent divine is that which is distant, uninvolved, or immutable; instead, the genuine transcendence of the divine depends on establishing a relation with other-being, i.e. with the spiritual community. However, this dependence is always internal rather than external: the divine is not conditioned by other-being in the sense that it determines spirit; rather, spirit is self-determining, which is why Hegel repeatedly emphasizes that other-being (the finite) is contained within the infinite. Williams says something to this effect when he states, “They do not imply divine ontological dependence on the human – for what God ‘needs’ and expects (according to Hegel) is human recognition of his independence and glory. But that independence and glory remain undiminished, even if they are not recognized.”

Recognition, according to Williams, is precisely a relationship which by virtue of its relationality necessarily includes reciprocity. He refers to Hegel’s statement, “a one-sided relation is no relation at all” to suggest that a speculative conception of the kind of relation between the divine and the non-divine, i.e. the unity of the two spheres, commits us to a doctrine of reciprocity. We have already encountered a similar movement with respect to the double ecstatics: the divine divests itself into the finite while the finite divests itself into God – this is a genuine relation that overthrows standard hierarchical norms because it posits a species of mutual immanence wherein nothing of the other is lost; instead, the other is fully achieved (recognized). According to Williams, this is precisely the function of the religious community: to affirm the relation between God and world via recognition of the divine which is equally the divine’s own recognition of itself (which includes recognition of the other as a participating in it). In this way, the genuine transcendence of the divine is affirmed; the divine eternally extends

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277 Ibid., 277-278.
beyond itself and eternally enacts the reconciliation of other-being with itself not merely as logical movement which overcomes contradiction, but as a subject which paradoxically maintains itself and the other in a unity of identity and difference.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to show that the Hegelian dialectic of absolute spirit is not fundamentally atheistic or nihilistic but instead demonstrates a commitment to an essentially theistic narrative which upholds the genuine transcendence of God. This is accomplished via a speculative theory of mutual immanence which incorporates a double ecstasis between the divine and the non-divine. In other words, it is precisely because ecstasis always contains within it the movement of enstasis, that unification with the divine does not take place only in the divine but also in the non-divine. Just as in the movement of friendship wherein the self immerses itself into the other while the other immerses herself into me, so too does the divine inhabit the other just as the other inhabits the divine. This movement cannot be collapsed into an empty oscillation between terms; rather, it must be conceptualized as a reciprocal relationality wherein both terms maintain their integrity as independent, autonomous beings.

What the movement of double ecstasis logically indicates within Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative is the double transfiguration of God and world. With respect to the first aspect of the transfiguration, the view that upon the death of Christ, the divine is transfigured into spirit such that the triune characterization of the ontological Trinity is entirely negated is flawed. It fails to take into account that for Hegel the death of the divine always
signals resurrection. What is resurrected is not one divine entity but the triune God (spirit). This suggests that the universal and particular modalities of spirit are still in play; they do not simply vanish into thin air, but are resurrected as concrete modalities of spirit which are eternally generated and negated. This does not mean that for Hegel there is a ‘Big Other’ now within the finite world who operates behind the scenes; rather, it suggests that there is full subject that is inextricably involved in the world which is, at the same time, not reducible to the world. One might object that what I am advancing is a sort of ‘meta-subject’ where humankind (its activities, relations, etc.) extends beyond itself which, in turn, signals something greater than itself as the existent divine within the world; or, stated differently, a view that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts where the parts are identified as human beings and the whole is given the name ‘God’. But, this does not maintain the integrity (the independence and autonomy) of Hegel’s absolute spirit. Again, if we are to take seriously the notion that spirit is a genuine subject it must have radically independent subsistence.

Furthermore, it is precisely because the divine is conceived as a genuine subject that the finite sphere is able to inhabit a real relation with the divine. If transfiguration occurs merely on the side of the divine, we return to the notion that spirit ‘descends’ upon the earth, i.e. that spirit ‘occupies’ the non-divine rather than maintaining a strong mutual immanence wherein the non-divine shares or participates in the divine. A one-sided transfiguration reverts to the standard theism Milbank endorses, which is subject to a plague of criticisms including that of restoring degenerative transcendence to the concept of the divine. Instead, Hegel circumvents this problem by highlighting the equal co-habitation of the non-divine with the divine. On this side, one might object that this throws into question the status of the infinite, for a divine being that inhabits negative finitude is, generally speaking, purely immanent. Thus, the transfiguration of finitude
into the ‘kingdom of heaven’ is necessary not only so that the religious community can enter into
the *unio mystica* where spirit is concretely present, but also so that the divine can reconcile this
aspect of otherness within itself. In other words, the finite sphere inhabits a radically new divine
sphere. Contra the popular Marxist interpretation that Hegel brings heaven down to earth, we
uncover a completely different movement which does not merely posit the opposite, i.e. that the
Hegelian narrative ultimately brings the finite up to the infinite; rather, both spheres – the finite
and the infinite – are radically altered by the reconciliatory encounter with the other. What Hegel
presents, therefore, is not a revised version of a traditional theodicy, nor is it simply a
theogenesis; rather, it is both: humankind is brought into the sphere of the divine to which it
essentially belongs, but this inclusion of the other into the divine transforms the divine into the
singular subject.

Hence, the divine remains divine; by virtue of its very character as the infinite, it extends
beyond the non-divine. Concepts such as infinite love, grace and generosity belong first and
foremost to the divine being, not to the finite spiritual being. This is why Hodgson states, “What
is ‘affirmative’ or active is not the finite but the infinite. The religious relationship and hence the
proofs are based not on an autonomous self-elevation of finite spirit but, speculatively expressed,
on the return of infinite or absolute spirit to itself in and through the self-negation of finite
spirit.”

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representational modes of thinking, etc. This is why the unity of the divine and the non-divine is grasped as a future event rather than a present actuality: human consciousness is still limited by finitude insofar as it relies on representational thinking to grasp spirit. Hence, an interpretation which suggests, as Žižek’s does, that spirit (as both divine and non-divine) has accomplished its goal on the side of finitude, misrepresents the fact that for Hegel finitude does not entirely escape its characterization as finite (at least not with respect to human consciousness of the divine). That the presence of spirit is concrete, in the Here-and-Now is true for spirit, but for the spiritual being, there remains an ambiguity in her ability to grasp this truth speculatively, i.e. from the standpoint of eternity.

The divine being in Hegelian ontotheology is therefore emphatically not purely self-relational as Milbank (and to some extent Žižek) claims. While it is true that for Hegel absolute spirit first and foremost develops itself, this development requires a reciprocal relation with that which is absolutely other, i.e. with finite being. Without this, spirit is simply the obsolete divine of popular theism or the amorphous divine of pantheism. Commentators such as Williams, O’Regan, and Cooper have advanced various views which place Hegelian ontotheology within the panentheist tradition: Williams refers to it as a “social-personal, panentheistic, dipolar concept of God.”\(^{279}\) Cooper refers to the Hegelian logic of spirit as “dialectical historical panentheism.”\(^{280}\) And, O’Regan advances the view that it is “narrative dialectical panentheism.”\(^{281}\) Each view is compelling in its own way: Williams manages to maintain the genuine subjectivity of the divine being in Hegelian ontotheology without sacrificing the significance of the religious community. Cooper emphasizes the historical aspect of the


\(^{281}\) O’Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, 297-298.
development of spirit, i.e. its development in finitude, without falling into a theory of pure
immanence. O’Regan, expressing a similar account, emphasizes the importance of the narrative
aspect the dialectical unfolding of absolute spirit which has the dual advantage of securing the
genuine transcendence of the divine being and maintaining a holistic or inclusive view of the
Hegelian Trinity. However, while each of these interpretations is in my view a compelling
account of Hegelian ontotheology, my own position corresponds most closely to Williams’ with
an added emphasis on paradoxical theism. In other words, I agree with Milbank that a theistic
logic includes and maintains paradoxical logic; where I am in disagreement with Milbank is with
respect to his claim that dialectical logic cannot include paradoxical thought. This is because
Milbank makes the mistake of conflating paradox and contradiction. Since Hegelian dialectical
logic has for its goal the resolution of contradiction, it is clear that it cannot maintain
contradiction without undermining itself. Contradictions signify incoherence, i.e. each term
actively negates the truth of the other. However, paradox is something different: in paradox we
encounter two apparently exclusive terms that together are nevertheless coherent. But, there is
nothing negative in the paradox; instead, we uncover two positive, affirmative terms which
coincide without negating the other. This is precisely the concluding relation between the divine
and the non-divine in Hegel’s speculative redescription of the Christian narrative. More simply,
dialectical logic moves from resolving contradiction to affirming non-exclusive paradox.²⁸²

²⁸² By ‘non-exclusive’ paradox, I mean simply this: the integrity of the two terms is not negated in any way by their
non-exclusivity. Both the divine and the non-divine share in the same essential status of the infinite. This divine is
not subsumed under the finite, nor is the finite subsumed under the divine; rather, the finite recognizes that the truth
of its being, of its essentiality, lies in the infinite. This does not establish a dualism wherein God and world
synonymous at the level of the infinite (as we have seen, the finite ‘remains’ finite insofar as it does not entirely
escape finitude, i.e. insofar as it is still determined by temporality). However, it does suggest that there is no
subservience on other side: the generosity of God’s being creates being that is equal to his own and extends beyond
its own limits. In this sense, Žižek is correct, God gives all that he is – this is the true meaning of the doctrine of
kenosis.
Hence, my view is that Hegelian theism fundamentally involves an appeal to paradoxical mysticism, i.e. the kind of mystical theology we find in Eckhart, for example. I use the term ‘mysticism’ here to denote a kind of speculative theism which embraces the transcendence of the divine while simultaneously positing a theory of mutual immanence. The characterization of the logic of absolute spirit as narrative or historical panentheism is correct insofar as the internal development of the ontological Trinity relies on its external relation with other-being; however, I would add that a specific kind of paradoxical logic is not only maintained throughout the logical and existential development of spirit but required. At the conclusion of the Hegelian narrative, we are confronted by two radically independent, fully autonomous, absolute beings – God and humankind. This is precisely why Williams stresses that, “Difference is one constitutive principle of totality; identity is another. The totality itself is not simply unity, but a determinate unity in and through difference.” The aspect of difference occupies the same level as that of identity (they have the same value): both are required in order for spirit to develop itself as a full Subject.

Milbank rejects this outcome because it is too ‘democratic,’ i.e. God and world participate in a mutual exchange which benefits both equally and which, while destabilizing power nevertheless falls prey to the Kantian critique of revolution, i.e. it never really succeeds at changing the nature of the political state, it only shifts political power. He applies this criticism to Hegelian ontotheology because it follows from a Scotist univocity which does not admit genuine reciprocity between the divine and the non-divine. He notes, “On the other hand, the

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283 Williams, Proofs and Personhood of God, 251.
284 We read: “The newer view instead grants a certain independent receptive status to the creature, such that, as the possibility of finite existence, fully comprehensible as to its makeup in its own terms without reference to God (according to Duns Scotus) it, as it were, receives from God simply an efficient causal bringing of this possibility into existence. Its actual existence then accures to it as something belonging to it in its own right once ‘handed over.’ As nonparticipative it does not continue to be held as a gift and held on trust as a gift.” Milbank, Monstrosity of Christ, 199
dethroning of the old metaphysical establishment by Scotus merely ushers in a new class of more willful hierarchs, and ensures the ontological dominance of sheer size (the infinite) and might (the power to sunder and arrange any apparent integrity).” By his account, then, Hegelian ontotheology when not revealing the sheer void underlying the origin of all being demonstrates instead a degenerative theism which simply reifies the arbitrary power of the divine. Consequently, any relation the non-divine shares with the divine is one which attempts an egalitarian contract but is always confronted by the untouchable absolute monarch.

However, if we take seriously the view that what Hegel presents is not an egalitarian contract but a loving exchange, there is nothing particularly democratic about it. His ontotheology is not a failed revolution in the sense that it simply shifts power from one locale to another. While Žižek cannot conceive of any God which does not enact some form of authoritarianism, Milbank cannot conceive of any God outside traditional Christian theism which does not enact some form of authoritarianism. Again, their positions are less antithetical to one another than we might think. But, Hegel’s concept of the divine takes a radically different form than that of political power; instead, it is defined in and through love which while including within it an element of power is not antagonistic or negative. The infinite love of which Hegel speaks is the outcome of infinite anguish: it is defined precisely by its negation of antagonism (of negative other-being). In infinite love, the divine fully reveals the truth of being, i.e. that it is infinite being, that it belongs to the divine not as property but in its own right as that to which God has reconciled himself. This is the sacrifice enacted on the part of the divine which does not subsume the divine under the non-divine, nor does it make of the divine an impotent tragic figure: the divine is infinite precisely because it can give everything it is to other-being such that other-being can recognize the truth that it is God.

\[285\] Ibid., 206.
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Conclusion

Hegel concludes the *LPR* by noting,

>This reconciliation is philosophy. Philosophy is to this extent theology. It presents the reconciliation of God with himself and with nature, showing that nature, otherness, is implicitly divine, and that the raising of itself to reconciliation is on the one hand what finite spirit implicitly is, while on the other hand it arrives at this reconciliation, or brings it forth, in world history. This reconciliation is the peace of God, which does not ‘surpass all reason,’ but is rather the peace that *through* reason is first known and thought and recognized as true.«^{286}

There are a variety of reasons why we can advance the view that a theistic interpretation of the Hegelian narrative of spirit is preferable to an atheistic or nihilistic interpretation, the first of which is that it endorses a genuine divine. In order to affirm the presence of a concrete divine being, we need not appeal to the mythologized figure of God popular Christianity so often expresses, nor do we need to reduce the divine into the whole of human activity. Instead, Hegelian ontotheology points toward a middle path wherein the divine is fundamentally involved in human existence, so much so that it took on the most tragic element of human experience in order to become concrete to itself and in order to present human consciousness with a transformative knowledge and experience that it is more than arbitrary existence, but is necessary to the essential nature of reality as such.

The Hegelian narrative of absolute spirit does not express a necessary progression of historical events, but instead emphasizes the sheer contingency of our coming to this perspective: for Hegel, history could always have been imagined differently, but its development as the

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development of spirit, always moves in the direction of establishing the concrete presence of the
divine in a world which is no longer merely finite or infinite, but something altogether different.
The striving toward the divine on the part of human consciousness is eternal insofar as it
struggles to make sense of a changing world which can only envision true reconciliation as a
future event. This is especially the case now as the Christian religion, among others, continues to
undergo a crisis of faith which, in turn, pushes human consciousness toward a false religiosity
founded on weak moralism and an empty un-responsive God. Against this more extreme
religious fundamentalism we encounter a purely reactionary protest which endorses the non-
existence of God with as much fervor as the position which argues for it. Yet, both express the
same essential position: a desperate alienation from the divine.

Both views – a dogmatic religiosity and a reactionary atheism – rely on a false
conception of the divine, one, ironically enough, not endorsed by rigorous Christian theology.
And yet, the myths concerning the nature and existence of the divine continue on both sides. It is
for this reason that, as Hegel already saw, the debate between dispassionate secularism and
religious dogmatism goes nowhere: both sides talk past each other in their attempt to proclaim
the truth of their own positions. He notes,

The Enlightenment knows only of negation, of limit, of determinacy as such, and
therefore does an absolute injustice to the content. Form and determinacy entail not only
finitude and limit; rather, as a totality of form, determinacy is itself the concept, and these
various forms are themselves necessary and essential. In the appearance of God, God
determines himself.”

We cannot make the mistake of believing we have surpassed the enlightenment view of religion
or faith; modern secularism makes the logical mistake of asserting atheism against theism

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287 *LPR* 3, 1827, E346 G268.
without recognizing that it requires theism in order to make its position coherent. Žižek is quite correct to highlight this when he quotes John Gray,

‘Atheists say they want a secular world, but a world defined by the absence of the Christians’ god is still a Christian world. Secularism is like chastity, a condition defined by what it denies. If atheism has a future, it can only be in a Christian revival; but in fact Christianity and atheism are declining together.’

Žižek, for his part, wishes to invert this formula by advancing the possibility that the truth of religion is precisely atheism: atheism is logically prior to monotheism, or, stated otherwise, monotheism is a reaction against atheism. In some sense, this is his more radical position: rather than stating that the truth of religion is that material existence is positive non-being (a view which is already expressed in the long-standing tradition of Buddhist ontology), the notion from the western point of view that atheism is prior to theism is Žižek’s profoundest insight. It suggests that implicit within theism is the ever-present kernel of doubt, a point which popular theism often hastens over in its interest of self-preservation. From this standpoint, Žižek is a genuine theologian, for he does not shy away from the observation that a rigorous theology must grapple with the validity of its claims as well as its presuppositions.

However, the last sentence in the above passage is, in my view, not quite accurate: Christianity and atheism are not declining together; rather they are both evolving to meet the needs of the times. The continued rise of scientism has carved out a void which the Christian religious community today must confront head-on: however, rather than embracing advances in human knowledge it has retreated into a false conservatism which does not rely on traditional theology but which seeks to create a new theology which appropriates various myths in order to

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give itself credibility. In other words, it has attempted, especially in the Protestant sects, to
revitalize itself via superstition, the creation of false evils, polarization, and extreme exclusivity.
It has inserted itself into the political and cultural realms in order to advance a moralism which
has little to do with genuine religious faith or rationality. Christianity now conceives of itself
only in relation to a weak doctrine of sin, one which does not emphasize the freedom of human
beings, but instead highlights only their limitations and profits from them. One can say that this
characterization of Christianity is not particularly different from that which enlightenment and
post-enlightenment thinkers sought to challenge, and in many respects this is true. However,
Christianity has become even more fractured, disjointed, and incoherent with respect to its
purpose and goals. Perhaps this is because, as Žižek claims, Christianity is always a reaction to
atheism, an attempt to assert itself in a world of ‘positive non-being.’

However, atheism today has fared little better: insofar as its critiques attempt to challenge
‘religion’ wholesale it lacks the ability to speak directly to any member of the religious
community. Atheism makes the mistake of ‘preaching to the choir.’ In other words, religion as
such and certainly Christianity is more fluid and adaptable than atheism recognizes: atheism is,
generally speaking, nothing more than shadow boxing – there is no ‘real’ opponent present. One
can go so far as to say this is the lot of atheism insofar as it seeks to destabilize the belief that a
God exists; atheism always fights against an invisible opponent (an opponent whose existence it
has denied). However, the view that atheism seeks to undermine an absolute divine is, in my
view, false: atheism presents itself as a challenge to human beings, to the human community, not
the divine. Its content, unlike religion, is human culture, human politics and human knowledge.
Because of this, atheism is often more of a political movement than a genuine theological
response. If one asks what is at stake in atheism, its goal never really lies in disproving the
existence of God, but in disproving the value of human belief in God. This is a far more difficult thing to prove, for it must show that a belief in the divine somehow denies to the believer a greater truth, i.e. a truth which states that there is nothing beyond itself. This is why a position like Žižek’s which states, “nothing is true except that nothing is true,’ is so unsatisfying: after this assertion, nothing more can be said. Rather than opening up opportunities for affirming a fuller reality, atheism closes off an entire aspect of philosohico-theological thought. Again, Žižek is particularly rigorous with respect to his atheism: in order to be truly atheistic one must be committed to species of nihilism which rejects the ontological weight of essentiality. If there is no divine substance or subject to bring order or permanence to material existence, then materiality is the product of a stream of aggregates which spontaneously and chaotically joins together various disparate elements in an appearance of coherence. This appearance, however, while having the character of ‘truth’ for us, knows nothing of truth and has no power to give itself over to us as truth.

It is precisely because this is the conclusion of a rigorous atheism that I maintain that Hegel is not atheistic. His recognition of the infinite anguish of alienation suggests that an account such as the one presented by Žižek is fundamentally antithetical to not only his logic of spirit but equally to his philosophical enterprise as a whole. Hegel emphatically does not seek to overcome alienation so that he might posit a greater form of alienation, so that he might reveal an even deeper tragedy in the very being of humankind. For Hegel, the death of God always signifies the resurrection of the divine, one which, while not falling into a species of classical theism, nevertheless upholds the view that the truth of existence is not no-thing, but a something which remains in spite of and even enhanced by the negativity implicit in it. To be sure, Hegel has no patience for dogmatic religiosity: it is obvious that he has not resurrected the transcendent
being of the beyond. By positing a divine subject whose transcendence is generated upon its involvement in finite existence, Hegel explicitly reveals that his project is altogether different than a narrow or standard Christian theism.

What this demonstrates, however, is that his philosophico-theological work is already a response to the division between theism and secularism, and it is for this reason that his theological insights remain absolutely relevant to our times. Hegel’s logic of absolute spirit which includes his ontotheology as well as his speculative redescription of the Christian narrative anticipates questions and problems that have been implicit in the division between atheism/secularism and theism since his time. Regarding the question of whether Hegel can properly be called a Christian theist, John Burbridge offers this response: “In each area he [Hegel] betrays the distinctive traits that defines the mainstream of the Christian tradition. We can therefore conclude that Hegel was a Christian.” However, Burbridge goes a step further than this. What he means is that Hegel taken up in his own time can be understood from a Christian theistic lens; today, Hegel may be something altogether different. There are good reasons to believe that with the advent of a globalized world wherein religious diversity is more present to us than ever before, Hegel could have imagined the religion of absolute spirit to take a different shape, to embrace a religious pluralism which does not privilege the Christian narrative above all others but which points toward the development of something new, something that surpasses even the revealed religion. Hodgson, Burbridge, and others have all gestured toward this possibility and, as we have seen, Hegel himself points to this when he posits that the vocation of the spiritual being (the eternal striving towards the divine) only begins upon the reconciliation of the divine and the non-divine. For those who wish to say that Hegel presents us

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with an account concerning the end of history or the completion of the dialectical unfolding of 
spirit, such passages are particularly significant. They testify to the possibility that although spirit 
has completed its transfiguration, i.e. has become concrete to itself, the work of dialectal logic 
remains.

This may suggest to some that in a contemporary reworking of the Hegelian logic of 
spirit we might be able to uncover something like a post-religious humanism or a subjective 
religiosity wherein each individual maintains her own subjective knowing in and through her 
relationships with others; however, my inclination is to approach these views with caution. There 
are two primary reasons for this: first, we must remember that Hegel embraces spirit as 
universality – a universality which includes genuine plurality within it – but which is 
nevertheless still expressive of a greater unity. Second, and closely related to the first point, 
Hegel maintains the concreteness of spirit: spirit is not merely the whole which is greater than 
the sum of its parts. A diffuse universality which merely absorbs all difference and subsumes it 
under its logic is subject to the numerous critiques of enlightenment rationality Hegel himself 
advances. Thus, contemporary religious pluralism, under the heading of Hegelian dialectical 
logic, could not be wholly inclusive in the sense that it accepts all difference and posits it within 
itself. As tempting as it might be, we cannot discard or ignore the fact that Hegel’s concept of 
spirit as it is presented ultimately conforms to a fairly eurocentric view which privileges its 
narrative above all others.

Hence, it is difficult to conceive of a contemporary Hegelian logic of spirit, unless we 
take the view that Christianity is not the ultimate shape of spirit. And, this is perhaps the most 
compelling and intriguing aspect of the Hegelian theodicy: he leaves space for the contingency 
of human history. Indeed, Hegel does not state that Christianity is the only expression of spirit,
nor is it the final expression of spirit; rather, it is the most adequate expression of spirit. This nuance is important for it reveals the possibility of an even higher, more appropriate religion which conforms to the ‘new reality’ with which we are confronted at the conclusion of the Christian narrative.

Thus, in response to the question ‘why theism?’ or ‘why a theistic Hegel?’ my position is the following: first, Hegel’s account of spirit which at its core is an attempt to overcome the alienation of the divine and the non-divine is in itself a theistic rather than atheistic project for the reasons outlined above. Second, a theistic interpretation of Hegel means that historically Christian concepts such as forgiveness, absolution, otherness, and freedom are preserved according to their original meaning within that tradition. In other words, if the concepts at work in the Hegelian logic of absolute spirit are understood from an atheistic/nihilistic lens, they lose their force without the added work of justifying their coherence and necessity within the system. If understood via a historically situated tradition of theism, their inclusion within the logic of absolute spirit is intelligible. Third, taking a broader view, the implications of a theistic philosophy of spirit are more compelling than an atheistic philosophy of spirit insofar as the former generally attempts to determine the concreteness of reality whereas the latter generally attempts to deny it. As I have already noted, the atheist must demonstrate that theism is somehow detrimental to the understanding and knowledge of the human being.

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290 This does not suggest that we cannot articulate these concepts in a non-theistic way; it is simply to say that when taken up within the Hegelian narrative of absolute spirit, they conform to a particularly theistic (Christian) conceptual history. If they are not theistic (if Hegel’s theodicy is atheistic/nihilistic), one has to explain why and how these concepts function with the narrative. But, Hegel does not deviate, at least with respect to significantly Christian concepts, from a fairly traditional theistic presentation of them.

291 This is not to say that there aren’t strong arguments for why a particular religious view might be detrimental to an individual, a community, or the larger world. But, this critique challenges particular aspects of religious understanding from a political, social, cultural or ethical point of view. The consequences which follow from a belief in or knowledge of the divine whether good or bad do not deny the validity of religious faith; they merely indicate the fact that every principle or aspect of human life can be oriented toward the good or oriented toward evil. This is why the view that religion (especially Christian religion) is primarily concerned with or should be concerned
Nevertheless, there are several potential objections to this interpretation of the Hegelian logic of spirit, a few of which I will present here: first, Hegel’s concept of otherness might still be too relative; the other is genuinely other but the possibility of instantiating a relation is always present. From a contemporary standpoint, we might ask if this is not too idealized a conception of alterity, if there are forms of otherness which, by virtue of historical, political, or cultural conventions, simply cannot be subsumed under the logic of reconciliation. In other words, the concept of otherness as work in Hegel’s logic of absolute spirit might not be robust enough to account for something like radical alterity. Criticisms like Milbank’s and Desmond’s – that Hegel’s God gives us only a false relationality because there is no genuine otherness at play – are worrisome if we acknowledge the possibility that Hegel’s concept of otherness is too limited. However, Hegel’s own position reveals that genuine otherness is necessary in order to effect the movement of reconciliation; without out, no true relation can be actualized. Thus, we might be able to say that Hegel is aware of this question (of the status of otherness) and that our concern is not whether he considered it but whether his conceptualization of alterity is too weak to admit something like radical alterity. Given his apparent commitment to what is, in effect, a western European conception of religion, we might be forced to conclude that from a contemporary standpoint there are not enough resources within the Hegelian logic of absolute spirit to adequately respond to this critique. A revised Hegelianism would have to introduce a great deal of conceptual work to properly address this problem. In my view, while no means impossible, this certainly presents a challenge. We would have to take seriously the challenge posed by Hegel that a ‘new actuality’ has emerged, one where new tensions and contradictions which up to now have only been implicit for consciousness have become explicit and must be overcome. 

with morality is so problematic. Morality is not the ultimate goal or purpose of faith: it is a positive or negative consequence of faith depending upon the way in which that faith is grasped.
This concern also plays into a related problem which Milbank briefly addresses: given Hegel’s commitment to the notion that all existence is mediated, can he account for anything which might resist mediation or that does not fall neatly into his dialectical logic? This problem, while significant, is in my view less worrisome than the question of radical alterity, for it makes use of a concept of dialectical logic that is less dynamic and more static than what Hegel provides. The belief that logical and existential relations fall neatly into Hegel’s dialectic assumes that it is more linear and sequential than what Hegel himself describes. As I have already noted elsewhere, point A does not automatically lead to point B; and, despite the insistence of certain critics, there is a strong commitment to contingency in Hegel’s dialectical logic which is not cancelled out by various elements of necessity in his logic of spirit.

Finally, objections can be made with respect to the kind of commitments Hegel is demonstrating in his philosophy of religion: from a contemporary standpoint the privileging of one religious tradition over another is problematic for it denies to the other the status of truth. A charitable reading of Hegel’s account notes that while Hegel certainly privileges the Christian narrative over other religious narratives, he does not deny the truth implicit in them. The problem instead arises from the fact that the truth is only made explicit in Christianity. Christ, according to Hegel, represents the universality of human suffering, and is at the same time, the catalyst for universal freedom from alienation. There is little to suggest that Hegel gives us a doctrine of conversion in his philosophy of religion; however, traces of it are present in the way he conceives of the community of believers, and for those who are suspicious of the history of conversion, this proves troubling. Again, without significant conceptual work which articulates what a modern formulation of the Hegelian spirit we are left only with the suggestion that Christianity is not the final word but only a passing shape of spirit. Yet, this is not enough to
adequately respond to the criticism that Christian institutions have exerted their power over too many people too often, that the mission of conversion is one which in practice has led to a long-standing history of atrocities for which no justification is possible and no apology sufficient.

Thus, we are left with the following question: can we make peace with a theistic Hegel today? I believe we can, insofar as we recognize first that Hegel’s theism is dynamic: it stresses genuine relationality via a unity established in and through identity and difference. Second, it is compassionate insofar as it seeks to articulate the fundamental anguish contained in humankind and its constant striving to overcome it. Third, it cites concrete positive freedom as the ultimate goal of the divine, a robust freedom which does not belong only to the divine but which, by virtue of our essential belonging to the divine, is equally ours. Finally, it indicates that the achievement of spirit has ushered in a new reality which rather than completing history opens it up. It is this last point especially which makes a theistic Hegel relevant: what might it take for the concrete presence of spirit to become explicit for us as temporally present rather than as a future event? What kind of reality might this speculative insight reveal? And, finally, might such an insight prove able to provide an adequate response to the continued tension between dogmatic faith and empty atheism, the “reigning dogmatisms of our time”?292

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MA program, Philosophy

Marlboro College, Vermont, 2007-2010  
BA, Philosophy

**Dissertation:** *A Metaphysics of Faith and Reason: Mystical and Trinitarian Elements in Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion*

Director: Robert Bernasconi, Sparks Professor of Philosophy  
Committee: Amy Allen, Professor of Philosophy, Department Head  
Brady Bowman, Assistant Professor of Philosophy  
Daniel Purdy, Professor of German Studies

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**Area of Specialization**

19th century Philosophy, 20th century Continental Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion

**Areas of Concentration**

Modern Philosophy, Medieval Philosophy, Feminist Philosophy