

Why Hegel? A Reading of Cyril O'Regan's *The Anatomy of Misremembering*, Volume 1

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Part One: Hegel as Ally

IN THE CONCLUDING “Afterword/Foreword” section of the first volume (*Hegel*) of *The Anatomy of Misremembering*, while cataloguing the many reasons why one might write a book on Balthasar’s engagement with Hegel, O’Regan states that the main one is that it “serves the crucial role in identifying Balthasarian discourse, as this discourse interlocks with and justifies particular Christian practices and forms of life” (p. 519). In other words, when we look closely at the many ways in which Balthasar’s thought engages Hegel’s, we get a better sense of the precise nature of that thought, and this suggests that Balthasar’s unique theological voice and his justification of “particular Christian practices and forms of life” are to be found precisely in his wrestling with Hegel.

At the outset of this article, then, I would like to cast my vote in favor of O’Regan’s notion that Hegel plays a more central role (even if, in the end, a largely negative one) in Balthasar’s thought than is often recognized, and I would also like to gather my comments around two particularly important themes from *The Anatomy of Misremembering* that bear this out. First, I would like to echo what it is, in general, that Balthasar finds worthwhile in Hegel’s thought as a way of highlighting Balthasar’s unique place in modern and post-modern theology. Second, I would like to specify this by looking at what Balthasar finds helpful and unhelpful in Hegel’s treatment of the God-world relationship, a relationship that is inseparable, in

both thinkers, from Trinitarian thought.¹ This second task will also involve a brief look at Balthasar's use of Bulgakov (and, behind him, of Maximus and Przywara).

In his article “*Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie?*”: Heidegger, Hegel, and the Stakes of Onto-Theo-Logy,” D. C. Schindler makes the following point about Heidegger's (and postmodern theology's in general) reaction to Hegel's epistemic hubris:

But it is precisely here that we see the potential dangers of the sort of *Destruktion* of Western thought that comes to expression in the critique of metaphysics as ontotheology, and indeed of any primarily polemical or skeptical stance with respect to the tradition. If one's first impulse toward a thinker is negative, one tends to oppose oneself dialectically to that thinker, which means that one thereby methodologically eliminates from one's own position the essential dimension that belongs to the other's. Rather than dismiss Hegel as the representative of onto-theo-logy and therefore of metaphysics, it is good to give him a fair hearing, in order to understand his reason for insisting on the intelligibility of revelation and on philosophy's native desire for God.²

While acknowledging the irredeemable dangers of Hegel's attempt to subsume God under the concept, Schindler goes on to quote Hegel accordingly:

Because knowledge of God does not fall within the comprehension of reason, there coheres with this standpoint the view that consciousness of God is rather sought only in the form of *feeling*. . . . What is rooted only in my feeling *is only for me*; what is in my feeling is what is mine, but it is not what is his [God's?], is not independent in and for itself.³

¹ I think it does not misrepresent O'Regan's book to say that the two central issues between Balthasar and Hegel concern, first, the relationship between God and the world-process and, second, the question of apocalyptic.

² D. C. Schindler, “*Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie?*”: Heidegger, Hegel, and the Stakes of Onto-Theo-Logy,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (Winter 2005): 646.

³ Ibid., 649, citing, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 1, *Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 136–37.

What happens, in such an approach, according to Hegel, is that:

Religion . . . shrivels up into simple feeling, into a contentless elevation of spirit into the eternal, etc., of which, however, it knows nothing and has nothing to say, since any cognizing would be a dragging down of the eternal into [reason's] sphere of finite connections.⁴

In short, Hegel seems here to have anticipated Nietzsche's notion that, for all intents and purposes, in modernity, God is as good as dead, and this death must be understood in terms of God's exclusion from the realm of reason, and thereby from the things of this world of what Hegel calls "finite connections."

In his summary of the things that Balthasar holds in common with Hegel, O'Regan echoes Schindler by stating that "there are few modern religious thinkers who have so resolutely held to the commitment that religious discourse aims at an absolute truth." He also notes that Balthasar recognizes in Hegel "a thinker who is convinced that truth has a practical dimension, that truth consists at least in part in 'making true'" (519).

If there is anything that I learned from O'Regan's book—and, in fact, I learned enormously from it—it is that, for all of his eventual criticism of Hegel's system, perhaps the chief reason for Balthasar's serious engagement had to do with Hegel's critique of the Enlightenment amnesia regarding the rational claims of religious discourse. We could go farther and say that Hegel's insistence on saying something about the whole reminds Balthasar of the what he calls the "youthful confidence" of the Church Fathers and sets both Hegel and the Fathers against the false humility of the Enlightenment, on the one hand (false because exiling God—and the transcendentals—to the realm of the unknown gave modern science absolute dominion over the temporal sphere, both in terms of science and politics), but also, on the other hand, against the sectarian and dualistic mentality of Neoscholasticism. Alas, of course, Hegel's ability to say something about the whole or to say something universally true came at the price of the singularity of Christ and his Church, and O'Regan does a masterful job of detailing how and why Balthasar thinks that this is a price too great to pay.

⁴ Ibid., (citing *Lectures*, 103).

In the early part of the book, O'Regan makes the interesting point that Balthasar's genealogy of modernity is more rhetorical than theoretical and that this allows him to be ambiguous regarding Hegel's genealogical predecessors. Various, therefore, Balthasar will accuse Hegelian thought of being Neo-Platonist (especially in its Proclean form), apocalyptic (especially in its Joachimist form), and Gnostic (especially in its Valentinian form). O'Regan strengthens and clarifies Balthasar's charge, first by placing it on more theoretical ground and, second, by therefore suggesting that it is the Valentinian charge that does (and should) take pride of place. This can be done if we see Gnosticism as being regulative in Hegel's thought in a grammatical rather than an invariantly narrative way. In the end, O'Regan concludes, Balthasar sees Hegel's greatest threat to lie in the *doppelgänger* that he places in classical Christianity's stead. This Valentinian style *doppelgänger* does not simply replace the Neo-Platonic or apocalyptic charge, but rather gives them a secondary and tertiary place.

Part Two: Hegel as Enemy: The God-World Relationship

With regard to the question of the God-world relationship and the intimately related question of the relationship between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, each of these three discourses has a deleterious effect on Hegel's system. They lead to (among other things): 1) a deterministic approach to creation, and therefore to redemption, that compromises the freedom and even the loving nature of God; 2) a relativization of the role of Christ in history, seeing him as simply a sign of God's universal union (*with confusion*) with the world, which will be carried out in post-Christic and post-ecclesial ways by the Spirit; 3) a reconfiguration of the biblical narrative such that it is subsumed under a more all-encompassing view of the whole that is arrived at prior to and apart from God's normative self-revelation in Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching office of the Church; and 4) a deterministic and evolutionary approach to history that not only thoroughly immanentizes the eschaton, but also gets rid of all traces of biblical and traditional apocalyptic.

If all of this is true, then it makes Balthasar's flirtation with Hegel seem particularly problematic. Or, given the enormity and depth of Hegel's disfigurement—of his misremembering—why risk the engagement? In answering this, we will have to recall what was said earlier: it seemed to Balthasar that both modernity and its alleged opposite, Neoscholastic anti-modernism, were in agreement that the doctrine of the Trinity had little (Neoscholasticism) or nothing

(Modernism) to do with what Hegel called above “the finite sphere of connections.” This had to do with the strange blend of fideism and rationalism in Enlightenment thought—recall that Kant says both that we can’t know God through reason and, then, that we ought to deal with religion in the bounds of reason alone—and, in Balthasar’s view, with the strangely similar juxtaposition of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, and nature and grace in Neoscholastic thought.

Balthasar’s appreciation for Hegel, then, can be seen in the latter’s unwillingness to keep the doctrine of the Trinity isolated in the subjective or private realm, on the one hand, or on the side of the strictly theological on the other. But this leads Balthasar to a rather paradoxical relationship both with the thought of Hegel and with the theological tradition in general. On the one hand, as I said above, Balthasar enlists Hegel and the Fathers against the dualism of the moderns and Neoscholastics. On the other hand, as we shall see, Balthasar’s engagement with Hegel leads him to a view of the analogy of being that calls into question, at times, even the Neo-Platonic approach of the Fathers. This leads to the rather startling insight, which I gleaned while reading this book, that it is precisely Balthasar’s willingness to seriously engage Hegel that makes him less Hegelian in some ways—pardon the anachronism—than the Fathers, Scholastics, and Neoscholastics.

In the short work entitled *Love Alone is Credible*, Balthasar says the following:

The transition that fulfilled the philosophical universe in the Christian-theological one, granted to reason, enlightened and strengthened by grace, the highest possible vision of unity. Because of this unity, the question whether revelation introduced a special principle of unity was all but left behind.⁵

We should also recall that, in his early essay “Patristics, Scholastics, and Ourselves,” Balthasar concludes that the greatest danger even to Scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas was not the influence of Aristotle, but the residual effects of Platonism and the *exitus-reditus* schema. Consider the following, rather astonishing claim of Balthasar in this regard:

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 18.

However strange it may sound, the actual dangers of Scholasticism do not come from Aristotlianism . . . but from the residue of Platonism that had still not yet been overcome. That is why, to name the most important and controversial point, the material separation of nature and supernature . . . was never fully realized, even in Thomas. For Thomas still knew nothing of a natural final goal of man that pertains to the nature of the creature as such. . . . So he had to come to the conception of a “natural longing” of the creature for the supernatural vision of God. But this then entails, of course, the danger of interpreting the *potential oboedientialis* as a *potential naturalis*, which corresponds to the patristic danger of looking at the *pneuma* as an essential component of man.⁶

If we combine these two insights—first, that the Fathers were so inclined to accept the vision of unity provided by a perhaps overly hasty synthesis of Platonism and Christianity that they did not look for a distinctively Christian principle of unity (which, for Balthasar, is going to be interpersonal love), and second, that even the Scholastics, with the help of Aristotle, did not fully overcome the tendency simply to syncretize the Christian doctrine of creation, fall, and redemption with the *exitus-reditus* schema of the Greeks—and we then think of all of this in the light of Balthasar’s engagement with Hegel, we can begin to get a glimpse of the former’s unique understanding of the relationship between God and the world. And this is just another way of agreeing with O’Regan’s contention that a close analysis of the Balthasar-Hegel relationship is indispensable to a proper understanding of Balthasar himself. Here is how O’Regan addresses the issue of Neo-Platonism just outlined:

In the context of Hegel’s work one discovers the *libido domnandi* at the heart of a Neoplatonism of a philosophy of spirit, and finds the noetic ambition at the core of the urge for reality conceived as a totality. For the ambition to penetrate reality thoroughly compromises the *analogia entis* and collapses the

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves” (trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J.), *Communio: International Catholic Review* 24.2 (Summer 1997): 384. I realize that, especially in the light of recent scholarship, this is a controversial claim. My point here is not to defend it, but simply to point out its implications for Balthasar’s own understanding of the relationship between God and the world.

creator-created distinction. Even when the conceptual apparatus of negative theology is in full display . . . the tendency of both of these lines is towards the abolition of all mystery, whose excess dictates its transcendence of the metaphysical horizon. (77–8)

He continues:

Balthasar's point is that if Christian Neoplatonists such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus, and Bonaventure are to be judged as theologically sound, then two conditions must be satisfied. First, however obvious the presence of Proclus, both from an architectonic and symbolic point of view, the mode of Neoplatonism in all the above figures is in principle more nearly Plotinian than Proclean, since these discourses do not as a matter of fact validate the emanationist dynamic that leads to a collapse of the divine into the world, and the elevation of world into the divine. Second, in the final analysis any tendency towards identity in these Christian Neoplatonic discourses is resisted by recalling the biblical view of divine freedom and goodness that grounds the analogy between God and the world. (81)

Later in the book, we find this same balancing act—between, on the one hand, a proper respect for the full scope of reason and nature (everything that can be captured in the Greek understanding of *eros*) and, on the other, a proper respect for the freedom and transcendence of God—in Balthasar's engagement with the Christian East. In a fascinating section on Balthasar and Bulgakov, O'Regan shows us that the Russian thinker provided a model for Balthasar of how to have a thoroughly Trinitarian metaphysic without, for all of that, having to accept Hegel's failure to distinguish the divine acts of begetting and making. And, as is intimated at several points throughout O'Regan's book, it is Przywara's retrieval of the classical doctrine of analogy, itself worked out in a sustained engagement with Hegel, that prevents Balthasar's use of Bulgakov from proceeding in an overly Hegelian or sophiological direction. We should take a closer look at this.

In the beginning of his section on virtual fathers, O'Regan notes the reserve that Balthasar shows towards Bulgakov in his book on Maximus the Confessor. He states:

Sophiology is, for Balthasar, a neuralgic point in his Maximus book. . . . It threatens to disturb the ontological difference between the creator and creature, the unsurpassability of Christ, and the very notion of the triune God by insinuating a fourth hypostases. (303)

As Balthasar puts his concerns:

A certain ineradicable mistrust for an autonomous, objective nature, which exists prior to all participation in grace and which is not only spiritual but corporeal—a mistrust for a fundamental analogy between God and the creature—has always characterized Eastern thought and has led it to feel primordially related to all forms of self-transcendence, absorption, release of the finite into the finite.⁷

And yet Maximus, he tells us, “made it his project, not only to escape from these Eastern patterns through turning toward the personal thinking of the West, but also to illumine Eastern thought as a whole, in a redemptive way, with a personal Christology.”⁸

Nevertheless, O’Regan points out, by the time of the trilogy, Bulgakov will be read as an ally, with Maximus, of those who would think “radically of the communication of properties” (307). In particular, Bulgakov will be enlisted for two crucial contributions to Balthasar’s thought: first for the “meta-symbols” of ur-kenosis, super-time, and super-space, and second for his notion that on Holy Saturday Christ is dead among the dead and triumphant only in defeat.

For our present purposes, I am more interested in the first of these things, and in ur-kenosis in particular. The criticism made above of the Patristic and Scholastic tendency to find the union between nature and grace, the world and God, reason and revelation, and so on, in a sometimes overly hasty synthesis of Christianity and Platonism, rather than wondering if Christianity does not provide its own criterion, could sound like something that a Luther and a Barth would say. But then why is there all of this trucking with Hegel and a quasi-Hegelian (according to some) thinker such as Bulgakov?

Of the many things that I learned while reading O’Regan’s book, one of them is how better to answer that question. On the one

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 190.

⁸ Ibid.

hand, yes, Balthasar wants to draw a sharper line. But he does this, O'Regan shows us, without going the route of dialectical opposition. Rather, Balthasar shows that the tradition has the resources to address all of the proper concerns of Hegel without going down his, finally, Gnostic path. Such an approach is bound to be paradoxical, and this is the "on the other hand": it turns out that the god of the Greek philosophers (and perhaps in some way, therefore, the most high god of the Gnostics) is at once too removed and too close at the same time—too removed because too rarified and impersonal and too close because everything that exists does so only as a necessary emanation of God's being. Hegel tries to remedy the "too remote" part, but he can do so only by eliminating the god-ness of God and the worldliness of the world.

What Balthasar has learned in his engagement with Hegel, then, is that it is not enough simply to mimic Greek theology in our natural theology while adding God's nature as love to the second, theological story of our building. In the light of the Trinity and Christology, we have to think the relationship between God and the world from the ground up. One way of saying this is to say that, while Hegel resolves the problem of an extrinsic God by dragging him down to the level of the world, Balthasar resolves the problem by situating the difference between God and the world within the positive difference of the Trinitarian persons and by understanding the difference-in-unity of the world and God in the light of the difference-in-unity of the natures in Christ. This allows Balthasar to speak of a real relation between God and the world without going down the Hegelian/Valentinian path, and Bulgakov's *ur-kenosis* is critical in all of this. As O'Regan puts it:

One implication to which Balthasar draws attention as having particular pertinence to the issue of divine passibility is that suffering in Christ is not without remainder a function of Christ's human nature. Or more technically speaking, Christ's suffering is *enhypostatic*. (306)

But notice how speaking this way cuts both ways, both against Hegelian and traditionalist conclusions—against Hegel because the sacrifice or emptying that goes on in the Trinity stems from the fullness of love, and not from any sort of lack or potentiality. Nevertheless, and this time against a hyper-traditionalism, "recognition of the *enhypostatic* character of suffering would put a block on complacent assertions of

divine impassibility, which sometimes function within a metaphysical economy in which impassibility is simply the binary opposite of passibility, the content of which is provided by the observation of the world of change" (307).

To this point, it may seem as if I am placing Balthasar somewhere between traditional and Hegelian thought, and this could mislead on two levels: first, it could give the impression that critics of Balthasar who call him quasi-Hegelian are correct; and second, it could give the impression that O'Regan's book is primarily about showing us the ways in which Balthasar's thought is Hegelian. In fact, however, it is the case, first, that Balthasar's theology is much more interested in providing an alternative to Hegel than in baptizing him, and second, O'Regan's book is much more about Balthasar's differences with Hegel than their similarities.

Part of the misleading nature of what I have written above can be attributed to the fact that I have chosen to focus on a particular question: the relationship between God and the world, and therefore the question of God's impassibility. On the other major issue in the book, that of apocalyptic, Balthasar's differences with Hegel are more obvious. But even regarding the God-world relationship, I would want to concur with O'Regan that the differences far outweigh the similarities, and I will close with a final note about this assertion. I would like to suggest—and I think this is also the view of the *The Anatomy of Misremembering*—that Balthasar's engagement with Hegel did not simply make him want to do greater justice to the question of God's relationship with the world and its suffering (and therefore to appropriate Bulgakov's notion of *ur-kenosis*); it also alerted Balthasar to the dangers inherent in trying to work out the God-world relationship in the context of a philosophical system that has not yet been properly disciplined by the content of revelation, and therefore by the doctrine of creation, and therefore by the *analogia entis*. In short, Balthasar's attempt to do greater justice to the proper autonomy of the created order stems precisely from his desire to correct Hegel. And on this particular issue, I would like to suggest that it is Maximus, even more than Irenaeus, who provides Balthasar with a non-dualistic model of maintaining the proper distinctions between nature and grace, God and the world, and the two natures in Christ. Indeed, I will close by suggesting that it is Maximus and Przywara, both of whom play formidable roles in O'Regan's book, that allow Balthasar to rethink God's immutability in Bulgakovian ways without having to subscribe to the *doppelgänger* that is the Hegelian god. NCV