

Hegel and Christian Theology

GUY MANSINI, O.S.B.
Saint Meinrad School of Theology
St. Meinrad, Indiana

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, Mark Jordan pointed out what a great mistake it is to think that contemporary theologians are to do what patristic and medieval theologians did by bending regnant philosophical discourse to dogmatic expression and systematic understanding of the mysteries of faith.¹ As Augustine employed Plato, and Thomas Aquinas Aristotle, so the sapient theologian should take up Kant, as Georg Hermes did, or Schelling, as Johann Sebastian Drey did, and fashion a contemporary theological expression and understanding suited for the culture formed, or at least expressed, in part by these same philosophers.²

Jordan argued that this is a great mistake. Plato and Aristotle, innocent of the Gospel as they were, took up no position relative to its truth, for or against. Their metaphysical projects were underdetermined by the questions that Trinity, creation, Incarnation, and the end of man in the resurrection and beatifying vision pose. They remained plastic to the form of the gospel, which left its imprint across the board on the intussuscepted thought of Plato and Plotinus, of Aristotle and the Stoa.

Post-Christian, modern philosophers, however, define themselves over against the Gospel, over against the doctrines of the Church. Their definition, what is essential to them, consists in their

¹ Mark Jordan, “The Terms of the Debate over ‘Christian Philosophy,’” *Communio* 12 (1985): 293–311.

² See Gerald McCool, S.J., *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

anti-Christian character. If we adjust Enlightenment reason in such a way as to admit the truth of the Gospel, a truth beyond what reason can anticipate or demonstrate or judge but can only receive, if we adjust Enlightenment strictures on the power of God and the closure of the world so that miracles are possible, if we adjust Enlightenment standards of evidence so that miracles can reasonably be recognized, or if we adjust Enlightenment morality so that the love of friendship is not reduced to a higher concupiscence, then what is left? A sort of positivism that cannot even recognize itself as such and thinks it is the default position of unprejudiced reason. Nothing theologically useful is left.

But this leaves out the post-Enlightenment Idealists, who mourned the passing of God even as the Romantics did that of the gods, and who regretted the wounds inflicted on European culture by those who ignored the wounds of Christ. Was there not a better way than the alternatives between the Reformation or Baroque versions of Christianity, on the one hand, and religion within reason's limits, on the other? If, contrary to Kant, what we think is the real, and if how we think it, even in thinking its contraries, is to think how it is in itself, and if, contrary to Aristotle, potency is prior to act, then we can have a god who makes himself three in making the world, comes to consciousness in the logos of man, and pours out his spirit in the German state. Further, what the art of Europe expressed plastically and musically and dramatically, what the peasant celebrated in church and chapel, is stated in its complete and epic truth in the university tradition of that same German state, of which Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, by his own estimation, is the crown and completion.

Should so heterodox a Hegel be invited to the conversation of Christian theology?³ But he has already been invited. Part 3 of the first volume of Cyril O'Regan's *Anatomy* details Hans Urs von Balthasar's assessment of Jürgen Moltmann's heavily Hegelianized Christology and Trinitarian theology.⁴ And Moltmann is not alone. In addition, Balthasar's own list includes K. Barth, E. Jüngel, W. Pannenberg, K. Rahner, H. Küng, C. Bruaire, A. Chapelle, E. Brito, A. Léonard, and

³ Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁴ Cyril O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering: von Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity*, vol. 1, *Hegel* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 2014). In the present article, numbers in parentheses without label or identification are page numbers in this work.

G. Fessard—these are “unthinkable apart from Hegel.”⁵ O’Regan delimits the task thus: Balthasar’s engagement of modern philosophy must, on the one hand, recollect the Christian theological tradition more comprehensively and persuasively than Hegel’s remembrance of it and, on the other, show his deformation of it. For the first, Balthasar must be a more encyclopedic reader than Hegel. For the second, if the deformations and deflections of Hegel’s divine narrative fail to measure up to his own standards of discourse, where drama is privileged above epic, then Balthasar’s response to the Hegelian form of philosophical modernity must be reckoned successful.

Just because Hegel’s appropriation of Christian discourse is superficially much more complete and evident than that of Enlightenment rationalism, cleaning him up for theological use takes lots of scrubbing and lots of bleach. This is the issue of Part 2 of volume 1 of the *Anatomy*, “Gloriously Awry: Hegel’s Epic Deviation.” The exposition of how Balthasar disinfects Hegel’s Christology in chapter 3 weighs up the pluses and minuses. Balthasar thinks Hegel is to be praised (1) for understanding Christ as the fullness of revelation, where Incarnation completes creation, (2) for recognizing the cross as the pivot of divine initiative, (3) for seeing the career of Jesus against the background of his relation to the Father, and (4) for seeing Christ in relation to both the Church and the eschaton (186). But none of these issues as developed by Hegel can be given a clean bill of theological health.

As to the first, if Christ completes creation, the two are nevertheless not to be conflated as they are in Hegel (186–87). Second, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday largely disappear in Hegel’s exclusive focus on Good Friday, and his notion of sin is heterodox (188–90). As to the third, Hegel proposes an autonomous, rather than obedient, Christ and wanders into monophysitism (193–94). This will produce an essentialist understanding of kenosis in Hegel, rather than one that depends on the distinction between the form of God and the form of man (194). Finally, the Spirit displaces Christ for Hegel (195), and Hegel appropriates the theology of history of Joachim of Fiore (197).

In matters Trinitarian, Hegel is reproved for modalism (206), and there is to be no recognized divine process whose issue, through the economy, is the coming into being of divine personality and consciousness itself (cf. 231). Though God acts in any theo-drama,

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 3, *The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 40.

the history of salvation must be distinguished from the history of God (211). Further, Balthasar defends the tradition of excluding suffering from God against the Hegel-inspired Moltmann (222). And, contrary to Hegel, change and potentiality are to be altogether denied of God (225). Nonetheless, O'Regan writes, "influentially, and intentionally, the Hegelian tradition . . . disturbs the classical tradition's picture of an uninvolved and essentially impassible divine" (221). This influence extends to Balthasar, who can applaud Hegel's reproof of what O'Regan styles the theological tradition's "rote repetition of divine immutability and impassibility," which fails to engage the God disclosed in Scripture (229; see also 262). Schelling is similarly praised for opening out Christianity "beyond petrified orthodoxy" in finding a way to speak of "dynamism" in God "without reducing God to time" (236).

So, while Balthasar expressly denies change and potentiality in God, he recognizes a divine responsiveness to the world, a divine vulnerability to the world, and an enrichment of God through the cooperation of the created *dramatis personae* who share the stage with him in the drama of salvation (225). If suffering cannot be univocally attributed to God, O'Regan reports, Balthasar still recognizes a divine suffering in a different way than in creatures: there is vulnerability "to outside influence," but not in the same way as creatures are vulnerable to influence from outside themselves (225). Given such conditions on the attribution of impassibility to God, O'Regan concludes that "impassibility" functions as a sort of "marker" of the incapacity of our language or as a "required protocol of Christian speech about God" (225). We have to observe the formalities of Christian tradition, we have to say God is impassible—but then, we cannot say what we mean, we do not mean absolutely what we say, and we have to accommodate our initial saying to the richness of biblical language of God and the Cross. Thus, Hegel was not "totally wrong in suggesting a more dynamic view of God nor in his critique of the metaphysical tradition" (226). If we attribute suffering to God, then, unlike Hegel, we will recognize that this is analogous (226). And "strictly speaking," we shall admit that "we are no longer dealing even with analogy but with symbol" (227). Second-order symbols will be invoked such as "super-kenosis," "super-time," and "super-space" with which to speak of God (228). Such terms "suggest something like an explanatory function, while denying it" (228) and such meta-symbolic names are also "unnames" (228). Both

suffering *and* immutability, then, will be “symbols” relative to God (229), where we let “the linear nature of human logic” be challenged (229) and acknowledge that the Christian meaning of such symbols “cannot be tied exclusively to Greek metaphysics and its regime of binary oppositions of an ontological sort” (229). If O’Regan is accurately reporting Balthasar here (and he is), then, is Balthasar keeping our heads above water or drowning us? Or to switch metaphors, such a strategy seems to move the ball down the field but really does not. All the forward passes from literally meant names to symbol are cognitively incomplete. We are still back at our own ten-yard line.

A kenosis or emptying of God prior to the kenosis of the Incarnation has been mentioned. Here we touch not just “the centre of Balthasar’s theology,” as Graham Ward says, but what for Balthasar is “the condition for the possibility of theo-logic itself and its very form.”⁶ This description or inflection of love, “kenosis,” presides over Balthasar’s theology from Trinity to creation, from covenant to Incarnation, and to Church and Mariology and the form of Christian life. Now, there are “Hegelian anticipations” of the foundational Trinitarian “ur-kenosis,” and O’Regan thinks it unlikely Balthasar is not aware of them (229). In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, for instance, the Word is the self-emptying of essential Being,⁷ and at the imaginative level, “the Divine Being is reconciled with its existence through an event—the event of God’s emptying Himself of His Divine Being through His factual Incarnation and His Death.”⁸

The emptying or kenosis of the Son in Philippians 2:7, we recall, was understood by the Fathers to be the very same thing as taking the form of humanity, the assumption of his humanity from Mary.⁹ Human nature is not as full as divine nature. So, for a divine agent to take it up as the instrument of his agency means a relative emptying. Being found in human form, he could then humble himself, according to the next verse, becoming obedient unto death. The humility and obedience of Christ are evidently exercised through his humanity, and there is no mention of them prior to the assumption of

⁶ Graham Ward, “Kenosis: Death, Discourse and Resurrection,” in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 40.

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 767.

⁸ Ibid., 780.

⁹ See *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), commentary on Phil 2:7a.

the form of humanity. Their instantiation in Christ presupposes the assumed created and human will of Christ, and they enact properly human virtues of an upright religious stance before God.¹⁰

For Balthasar, however and as mentioned, the kenosis of the Incarnation presupposes an eternal kenosis, something included in the procession of the Son from the Father, something included in the Father's begetting his Son.

[T]he Father's being passes over, without remainder, to the begotten Son; and it would be a mistake to suggest that he, the Father, *becomes* or *develops* as a result of this self-giving [Hegel's mistake]. . . . This total self-giving, to which the Son and the Spirit respond by an equal self-giving, is a kind of "death," a first, radical "kenosis," as one might say. It is a kind of "super-death" that is a component of all love.¹¹

So, the kenosis of the Incarnation is founded as a more radical, Trinitarian kenosis, and in fact a double kenosis, that by which the Father surrenders himself to the Son and that by which the Son responds in self-surrender to the Father, which response itself is mediated by the self-giving of the Spirit. As the kenosis of the Incarnation ends in death, so the Trinitarian ones are a kind of "super-death." As the kenosis of the Incarnation enables a human obedience, so the eternal kenosis of the Son, responding to the Father, founds an eternal obedience. Balthasar quotes Adrienne von Speyr: "The Son prefers nothing to doing the Father's will, for even in being begotten he carries it out."¹²

Such an account of the Incarnation, a truly Trinitarian account and no simple minded transposition of Hegel, however, should be rejected.

We might want to admire the systematic breadth Balthasar achieves under the category of kenosis. On the other hand, it takes a word used to speak originally and distinctly of the Incarnation and wastes its capacity so as to mark that event by finding intra-Trinitarian and ecclesial analogues for it. Not that that is its only theological use in

¹⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qq. 104 (on obedience) and 161 (on humility).

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* (hereafter, *Theo-Drama V*), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 84.

¹² *Ibid.*, 87; see also 123.

the New Testament. St. Paul warns the Colossians against “philosophy and empty [*kenos*] deceit” (Col 2:8), and to the Corinthians, he declares that he does not preach the Gospel with “eloquent wisdom” (1 Cor 1:17), the wisdom Greeks seek (1:22), “lest the cross of Christ be emptied [*kenôthê*] of its power” (1:17).¹³ The expanded use of the term by Balthasar, however, lessens its force to indicate the novelty of the Incarnation and the majesty of the Cross by finding some archetype for it in eternity. The peculiar splendor of the Incarnation, its being the new and unprecedented and unpredicted thing that it is, is lost to view. Of course, there are conditions within the Trinity for the kenosis of the Incarnation. But it does not necessarily light them up by using the same name for them.

More importantly, the Trinitarian kenosis of Balthasar destroys the Trinitarian theology of the Church. For Balthasar, the Trinitarian relations his understanding of kenosis finds in turn serves to enable a divine obedience of Son to the Father, as just mentioned, as well as a “Trinitarian conversation” that is the model of prayer,¹⁴ Trinitarian prototypes of faith and love,¹⁵ and intra-Trinitarian “sacrifice.”¹⁶ Properly and necessarily created realities—the virtue of faith, conversation, and sacrifice—are moved into God.¹⁷ Moreover, moved into the Trinity, these realities imply three subjectivities, three wills, just as, when used in their ordinary sense to speak of us in relation to God, they suppose a created will distinct from the divine will. This is especially clear where a pre-Incarnation obedience is imputed to the Son, where he is imaged as endowed by the Father with a freedom that outstrips the Father’s own freedom (98, quoting von Speyr).¹⁸ Balthasar gives verbal assent to the unity, the uniqueness, of

¹³ Eph 5:6, which speaks of “empty words,” seems to be a warning against lewd and lascivious talk. That leaves Luke 1:53, where the rich are “sent empty away.”

¹⁴ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁷ Bruce Marshall, “The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question,” *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 25, observes that “the urge to suppose that everything which belongs to the persons of the Trinity in the economy goes all the way down in their immanent divine life, which just seems to go with thinking about the Trinity in these terms [where immanent and economic Trinity are identified], regularly threatens to make the unity of God unintelligible.”

¹⁸ See G. Mansini, “Obedience Religious, Christological, and Trinitarian,” *Nova et Vetera* 12 (2014): 395–413.

the divine will, as he must.¹⁹ But the language initiated by bumping kenosis up into the Trinity denies that unity.²⁰

The unity of the divine will across the Persons, its uniqueness, was a conquest of fourth-century Trinitarian theology. It is the product of the work of Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine.²¹ It is taught by the Church: Pope Damasus, First Lateran Council, Pope Agatho, Sixteenth Council of Toledo, Leo IX, and the Second Council of Lyons (the Profession of Faith of Michael Paleologus).

Moreover, the path from affirming two natures to affirming two wills in Christ was marked out in the monothelite controversy in the seventh century, and one can take it in the other direction: if there are three wills in the Trinity, then there are three natures. They are not necessarily generically distinct, but there will be three individuals who do not possess numerically one nature; there will be three individuals instantiating one nature three times, as three human persons do one specifically same human nature such that, with three wills, they can decide to listen, to trust, to obey one another, and so on.

The modern history of kenosis Christology, on the other hand, begins with Luther, with the Lutheran understanding that the communication of idioms means that the human nature of Christ shares the properties of the divine nature. From this impossibility, through the contortions of the controversy between Giessen and Tübingen, we arrive at another, that of Gottfried Thomasius (d.1875), for whom the Incarnation involves the self-limitation of the divine nature. Before Thomasius, there was Hegel and his own employment of “kenosis.”²²

In the more sophisticated textbooks of old-fashioned seminary theology, Kant and Hegel and theologians too much beholden to them made many an appearance, but they were introduced under

¹⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 95 and 485.

²⁰ Balthasar quotes von Speyr in *Theo-Drama V*, 89: “They [the divine persons] love each other so strongly that their wills always coincide, not in the sense of meeting somewhere in the middle and uniting, but within an eternal, absolute unity in which each one forgoes what is his and each is in agreement with the other from eternity, not within a rigid, dead identity but within that eternal life of love from which everything that bears the name of grace flows.”

²¹ See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), chs. 14 (for Gregory of Nyssa) and 15 (for Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine).

²² See the brief history in Ward, “Kenosis,” 25–40. Karl Barth’s notes in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4.1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, no. 59 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 180–83, are invaluable.

the category of “adversaries” to this, that, or the other theological thesis. It may be that Balthasar and O’Regan are right to think that Hegel can be dealt with only by drawing him up into some higher synthesis in which, as O’Regan explains, his own descriptions of Christian realities are measured and trimmed by the great chorus of Christian theological voices ancient, medieval, and modern and in which his own language can be rescued from obscuring the glory of God shining in the face of Christ and made to declare that same glory even despite itself. And it may be that they are right to think that such culturally and philosophically synthetic theological stories are the demand of the age because they are the demand of the Spirit. But it might also be argued that that concedes too much to Hegel himself and that some traditions of theological discourse—the modern kenotic one in particular—are misbegotten and badly formed and should be allowed to wither, to die, and to remain buried in unconsecrated ground—“adversaries.” That supposes quite another theology of history.

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