

Faith And Enlightenment: A Response To James Doull

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1. Hegel And Protestant Subjectivity

In his essay, "Faith and Enlightenment," James Doull makes a case for the view that the faith of the Protestant Reformation and the "pure insight" of Enlightenment are but "two opposed forms of the same totality."¹ Despite the often deadly hostility of Enlightenment to traditional religious belief, the form of consciousness which arose alternately with Lutheranism in the sixteenth century and with Cartesianism in the seventeenth is in reality one and the same: at the centre of both is the concrete relation of the individual rational soul to the truth, which is grasped as such in thought. The logic of Enlightenment, on this view, is none other than the inner moving principle of Protestant faith, while the inner principle of Protestant faith itself leads inevitably to Enlightenment.

Underlying Doull's argument is a commonly-held thesis, to the effect that the Reformation was a turning away from Christian truth as found in the fossilized objectivity of medieval religion to the truth discovered afresh and in a more adequate mode in rational subjectivity. This same thesis is implicit through the length and breadth of Hegel's philosophy, for it is found in a wide variety of places in the Hegelian corpus: first in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which Doull cites, but also equally clearly in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. In the latter, it is associated most interestingly with Eucharistic theology. To some minds, this might seem an odd thing. In his study of Hegel's religious thought, for example, Walter Jaeschke labours to understand the point.² But the truth is that the theology of the Eucharist has always brought a range of wider theological assumptions to a point of intense concentration in all the great theological systems, and that it had by Hegel's lifetime served for fully three centuries as the central *locus* of Christological and soteriological debate between the Lutheran and Reformed Confessions.

Hegel's reference is therefore natural: "It is in their cultus that the Christian confessions are distinct from one another," he reminds us, referring thus to long-established precedent as much as to the substance of his own view of the history of religion. He then moves immediately to illustrate the differences between the main ecclesiastical rivals on the scene in contemporary Prussia: the Catholics venerate the host as an external object; the

¹ "Faith and Enlightenment," *Dionysius*, 10 (1986), 129-135.

² Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 325ff.

Reformed (which it was the policy of the Prussian state to reconcile at last with the Lutherans) see the Eucharist as an ordinary psychological relationship where "everything speculative has disappeared, being sublated in the relationship of the community"; but the Lutherans rightly grasp the consecration of the host "in the faith and spirit of each individual."³

Now it has to be said that from the point of view of pure theological precision, Hegel's comments here are surprisingly defective. Nevertheless, it is clear what Hegel intends to say in the discussion: the goal is to draw attention to the particular genius of Lutheranism over against its major rivals, and to locate it as the middle and saving way between two intolerable extremes. In all probability, Hegel has in particular the specific version of Reformed theology currently being expounded by Friedrich Schleiermacher, his theological colleague in Berlin, in his sights. What is asserted by Hegel is the idea that the truth is, as it were, properly available to be grasped "in, with and under" the structures of rational human subjectivity. God is neither to be seen as a mere "beyond," nor as a purely romantic "presence" in the life of the religious community, but rather as the truest reality available to the rational individual, which is indeed laid hold of in the dynamics of individual faith.

The strength of the Hegelian thesis can perhaps best be evaluated in the light of theological sources. Already by 1520, Luther had come to reject the medieval view that faith is basically assent to divine teaching mediated through the Church in favour of the much more radical view that faith does nothing less than unite the believer immediately with God himself.⁴ On this view, the faith of the individual is fundamentally the bearer of a right relationship with God rather than, let us say, mere intellectual assent to teaching about the mechanism by which such relationship is established or maintained. Faith is, in other words, the means by which the pledge of the grace of God in the forgiveness of our sins is accepted. Or, to put the same thing another way, grace is received by faith, rather than first of all by way of some sacramental impartation, so much so that the sacraments are comprehensively understood by Luther purely as adjunct doctrines to that of justification by faith.

Clearly, then, the believing subject is central to Reformation theology. Nevertheless, Luther's view, and that of the Reformation as a whole, can easily be misunderstood. One can illustrate this in a number of ways, but let us begin with the status of private judgment in the theology of the Reformation. I wish to suggest that much that is commonly assumed about the priority of the subject in Luther is highly questionable. Luther himself, for example, conducted an extensive campaign *against* a thoroughgoing theology of private judgment through his opposition to the Reformation radicals Carlstadt and Müntzer. It was the latter who believed uncompromisingly in a divine truth apprehended subjectively and inwardly, even to the extent of rejecting the need for the "outward" help of holy scripture. Luther's position, and the substance of his case against

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter Hodgson; trans. Peter Hodgson *et al.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), III, pp. 154-156.

⁴ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenburg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans and Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), III, pp. 139-141.

his radical opponents in the Reform movement, rested on the conviction that though justification is by faith, such faith is born and nurtured *in the Church*, through the preaching of the gospel by ministers duly appointed, and through the right administration of the sacraments. To speak of Bible, preaching and sacraments as adjuncts of the Word that is apprehended solely by faith does not, therefore, do away with their importance. Christian truth is basically public rather than private in character in Luther's theology, and indeed in all mainstream Reformation theology, so much so that some versions of the supposedly Protestant principle of "private judgment" look more like what the Lutheran Reformers understood by sin (to be "turned in upon the self") than what they understood faith to be. The Lutheran principle of the "priesthood of all believers" does not mean, in short, that each person is his or her own priest. Rather, though individual faith is clearly of pivotal significance, the appointed channels in the Church are the bridges by which such faith comes. Thus, even in Reformation theology the believer is to submit to divine authority, mediated through the Church, and this is as real *in its way* in the theology of the Reformation as it was in the theology of the Latin West throughout the Middle Ages. Radical existing individuals the Reformers are not.

An alternative illustration of the limits of subjectivity in Reformation theology is, oddly enough, the fact that attached to the Reformation view of faith is a very particular doctrine of assurance, from which faith is said to be inseparable, and according to which it is said that no one who rightly believes doubts his or her salvation. The Council of Trent anathematized this teaching in 1547 in Canon 13 on the doctrine of justification, apparently on the grounds that justification had here been absurdly confused with mere self-certainty. This, however, was a misreading of the position attacked, for the Reformers' teaching was not at all that subjective faith in and of itself justifies, or that of itself it confers the assurance of salvation. The idea is rather that faith as faith has an object; more specifically, it clings to the divine *promise*, offered in God's Word. When such forgiveness is doubted, then, the individual's faith is somehow incomplete. To believe at all is to trust in the faithfulness of God, which is, in the strictest possible sense, something eternally trustworthy; to fail to have such trust is, then, when all is said and done, a kind of unbelief. This teaching, which was found already in Luther, was taken up extensively by his deputy, Melancthon, and was also emphatically embraced in the theology of John Calvin. Though it represents the formal equivalent within the Reformation's theology of faith to the scholastic sacramental principle, "*ex opere operato*," which likewise offered a *guarantee* of grace through the sacramental channels of the Church on the basis of the promise of God, it is fair to say that the Reformers' idea at this point was comprehensively misunderstood by the Fathers of Trent.

The question arises, then, whether Hegel too has misunderstood the nature of Lutheran and Protestant subjectivity. If he is capable of misrepresenting the Reformed theology of the Lord's Supper (as he clearly does), might one not say the same of his summary treatment of the Reformation tradition as a whole? Are faith and pure insight not, perhaps, very different after all?

My own reading of Hegel suggests that the principle of subjectivity as it appears in Hegel's treatment of the Lutheran Reformation is not, in fact, to be confused with

subjectivism of the sort the Lutheran Reformation opposed. The grounds for this judgment are that the context of the entire discussion is a rational universality which is informed at every stage by the participation of the finite spirit in the divine *Geist*, or perhaps better, by the immanence of the divine *Geist* in it. Though perhaps not every philosopher, and certainly not every theologian, would construe things in quite this way, my contention is that one has to understand Hegel's *Christian* thought as running parallel in important respects to that of Justin Martyr, who is possibly the most optimistic of all the Church Fathers concerning the relation between theology and secular philosophy. Justin taught something that in many ways anticipates the philosophy of Hegel: that all who have lived by Reason (i.e., the divine *Logos* which Christ is) have been Christians, that they have in truth thought and lived as such, whether they knew it or not. Socrates, Justin tells his unbelieving and perhaps also incredulous audience in the *First Apology*, was none other than a *Christian*. Hegel's position is very similar as a piece of theology, for the divine rational principle is equally uppermost in Hegel's theological thought, though undoubtedly it has entered the history of philosophy in a new way. Hegel's position is thus that the reason in Enlightenment Rationalism, for example, is one with the Christian divine rational principle; faith and pure insight cannot be any other than one, therefore, whether one lives in the second or the nineteenth century.

Such claims are, of course, bitter medicine to many a theologian, and it would scarcely be sane to hope that theologians today are likely to adopt this line of thought. For one thing, the precedents in the Christian tradition are relatively few. For example, the Hegelian cause in the world of theology is not at all helped by the fact that Justin's early views concerning the hidden identity between secular philosophy and Christian theology were not wholly embraced by his successors. The man who is easily Justin's most important disciple, Irenaeus, for example, takes a much more careful line, seeking to tie Christian truth far more closely to the written tradition of the apostles rather than to that of the philosophers. During the two centuries following the work of Justin and Irenaeus, the biblical metaphor of "spoiling the Egyptians" comes to dominate in patristic discussions of the Church's relation to the philosophers: one may rightly take (i.e., "steal") what is best from them and use it in the service of God, but this by no means implies that they were members of the Church as well.

Theologians have generally had something of an arms-length relationship with philosophy. Perhaps this distance is also reflected in the place given to Hegel in theology today, which is generally characterized by here-and-there sets of clippings, mainly from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, that today somehow find their way into theological exposition. One thinks here of Hegel's citation in the latter of the controversial phrase "*Gott selbst liegt tot*" from a Lutheran chorale of the seventeenth century, a citation much loved but really *very* rarely understood on Hegel's own terms by contemporary theologians.⁵ We ought not to be too hard on the theologians, however, for the truth is also two-edged at this point: the kind of philosopher

⁵ An interesting discussion is, however, to be found in Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), pp. 64f., who points out that the chorale and this particular phrase had long been a controversial one in Lutheranism, a fact of which Hegel was almost certainly aware from his days in the Tübingen *Stift*.

who is capable of relating themes from Hegel to themes in theology with any degree of theological accuracy is also extraordinarily rare, much rarer than those who suppose themselves capable of doing so.

2. Doull: The Unity Of Faith And Pure Insight

For such reasons, the work of James Doull ought to be much, representing as it does the voice of a philosopher familiar both with the warp and woof of the Hegelian system, and indeed of the history of Western philosophy generally, and with the extraordinary depth of the Christian theological tradition, both Catholic and Reformed. This is all the more important in the contemporary context, since the relation between faith and Enlightenment is very much on the agenda of contemporary Christian thought. Theologians of various traditions have taken the opportunity presented by the rising "postmodern" tide to attempt at last to drown the old enemy, Enlightenment "foundationalism." The result has been a good deal of anti-Enlightenment crowing among theologians of late.⁶ The claim is that since postmodern thought shows that there is no such thing as an absolute rational foundation on which the true or the good rests, then neither does religion require such foundation. Rather, all thought is tradition-bound, arising in a particular linguistic culture. On such terms, the work of the theologian is no longer to seek rational foundations for faith from other fields of human discourse, whether these be in natural science, philosophy or even human religion in general. Rather, the task of theology is said to be to ensure that the rules of its own proper sphere of discourse are followed, and in the specific context of Christian theology in the West at the turn of the third millennium, to see to it that the attempt to achieve an accommodation with the outmoded thinking of the Enlightenment should cease.

In substance, what this amounts to is a revival of nominalism in contemporary theological thought. The new nominalism, however, is qualified and radicalized by the anthropocentric thrust of the very Enlightened modernity that it rejects. In the old theological nominalism of the late medieval period, absolute power was reserved for God, whose omnipotent divine will alone at the beginning of all things ordered the universe. But in the new nominalism, it is humans who uniquely possess the power to give meaning by virtue of language. Theology thus appears as a field of linguistic discourse which, undoubtedly, is as legitimate within the terms of the presuppositions of postmodern thought as any other, but only as human discourse.

My own response to this is to say simply that theology is metaphysical, in the sense that it is concerned with what is ultimately true and good, or it is nothing. As in Hegel's time, then, so also in ours: to the extent that metaphysics is a subject alien to theology, God is as good as dead. The problem with the postmodern thesis in theology is that the fundamental anthropocentric turn of modernity has by no means been rejected in it, while

⁶ The best example is probably the work of the (then) Cambridge theologian John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), a work which has come to define the views of a whole new brigade of theologians fighting under the banner of "radical orthodoxy."

the simultaneous rejection of metaphysics (which is as much Enlightened as it is postmodern) and thus of the ideal of universal rational truth only serves to intensify the dilemma for theology, which can never be content with pure linguistic convention.

Of course, theology can survive such strains, in some fashion. It is plain to see that it does so in the contemporary context, however much impaired by its philosophical assumptions. One could even go so far as to say that the postmodern theologians are to be blessed if they succeed in liberating theologians from certain of the intellectual corsets they been obliged to wear since the Enlightenment era. The destructive impact of Enlightenment is perhaps best seen in approaches to scripture, which since the rise of historical science and the advent of the biblical scholar as historian rather than theologian has long been emptied of divine action and often also of theological content in all but the most indirect of senses. Thus the Enlightened conviction is everywhere present in modern critical biblical scholarship that, whatever the Church may say, and however much it might huff and puff, the Son of God did *not* "come down from heaven," nor did the "incarnate" one, the man Jesus of Nazareth, rise from the dead on the third day, since these conflict with the basic presuppositions of historiography. Recourse may be had to a Kantian standpoint, whereby divine action is reserved for the sphere of moral influence, as in the classical Liberal Protestants, or, where the absolute good fails, to the existential interpretation of the Bultmannian school, whereby the kerygmatic call to authenticity serves as the only true modality of Christ's continuing presence. But such strenuous theological exercise generally looks unnecessary to the contemporary exegete; to paraphrase the classic Pauline resurrection-of-the-dead text, if Christ has not been raised, why go to all the bother? Consistent Enlightenment Deism is thus still the preferred option among Bible scholars, while it appears among the most assured results of modern theological science that the best way to rid the mind of religious belief is to become an exegete.

There are some possible gains to be made, then, but in general, the probable impact on theology of postmodernism looks rather unpromising. This is perhaps best seen in the contemporary tendency to develop a purely subjectivist-humanistic religion, a tendency particularly evident in "mainline" Protestantism. Since all truth has been rejected on the basis of critical theory, and the truth claim reduced to one or other version of the will to power, theology comes to be seen exclusively as a "liberative praxis." A certain type of Christian feminism, for example, will go so far as to create goddess figures to serve in the liberative quest. Such active reshaping of what other generations called reality is also evident among many in the forefront of the gay liberation movement in theology, who actively construe history in particular (which has, of course, no objective meaning in postmodernism) to serve the cause. Alternatively, and perhaps more surprisingly, since objectivity has been relinquished, an opposing tendency to appropriate postmodernity can be seen on the theological right, where Protestant evangelicals can today be found speaking warmly of nominalist theology, defending their own "communitarian" discourse on precisely the same grounds. Since there are no rational foundations, it seems, anything goes - apart from the claim to possess such foundations.

Postmodern theology, then, has once more placed the question of faith and Enlightenment at the forefront of contemporary theological debate. What has emerged, however, is a heightened form of anthropocentrism, of a sort never entertained in Enlightened thought. This has developed precisely because postmodern theology contains within itself the turn to the thinking subject characteristic of Enlightenment, while also surrendering the Enlightened concern to lay hold of reality as something rational. But it is not possible for a believer *really* to live in such a world.

Hegel's philosophy alone in the modern era claims to have reconciled the warring factions of religious belief and rational understanding. One could, in fact, plausibly go so far as Hans Küng in seeing this achievement explicitly as Hegel's life-work, as the precise project which generated the system.⁷ It was on this basis that Karl Barth could wonder aloud early in his theological career why it was that Hegel did not become for Protestantism something similar to what Thomas Aquinas became in the nineteenth century for Catholicism - i.e., the thinker who reconciles the Christian tradition with philosophical learning.⁸ There have, of course, been theologians who have thought so of Hegel, and though the legacy of Hegelianism of both the left and right to religion is very much a mixed blessing, it is also certainly the case that Hegelian philosophy in the broadest sense has shown itself capable of generating theological insight. One thinks in this context of contemporary theologians such as Walter Kasper, Eberhard Jüngel, or Peter Hodgson, who occasionally borrow insight from Hegel. Alternatively, there is also John Macquarrie, possibly the most influential living theologian writing in English, whose philosophical education was had under the last of the "British Hegelians," C.A. Campbell (1897-1974), at the University of Glasgow. Macquarrie's abiding interest in Hegelianism is evident in such notable doctrinal works as *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, or equally, in the more philosophical Gifford Lectures for 1983-84, *In Search of Deity*.⁹ Yet Macquarrie's is by no means an Hegelian theology, for as is well known, he came along life's way to be more heavily influenced by Heideggerian existentialism than the old Hegelian Idealism. The truth is that no leading theologian today is consistently Hegelian.

This is nowhere more evident than in the question of the relation between faith and Enlightenment. In Hegel, the reconciliation of the two was a matter of the utmost religious and philosophical importance, and in a certain sense, the only thing of importance. Nowhere in theology today, however, is his claim taken to heart that there is to be found in the Enlightenment "a realization of the Christian religion beyond that of earlier times" (to quote James Doull). The situation is quite the reverse: those who make constructive mention, for example, of the "speculative Good Friday," the death of God in Enlightened thought, seem unaware that the appearance of the idea in Hegel is only possible, only conceivable because the death of God has already been seen, as it were, from the standpoint of a "speculative Easter," a philosophical movement through which

⁷ Hans Kung, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J.R. Stephenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987).

⁸ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972), p. 384.

⁹ John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1990), and Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

Enlightenment has been reconciled to God, and God to it. The latter possibility is never entertained by our theological contemporaries, so much so that they seem unaware of the fact.

The result of this is that despite what has been, relatively speaking, a Hegel renaissance in theology over the past three decades, the real core of Hegel's philosophical position has not been grasped by the theologians. If, however, we were to suppose that Hegel were right, his significance would be incalculable. Were even a few Christian theologians able to speak of the Enlightenment as a modality of the work of the *Logos*, for example, and to find in it the "traces of the Trinity" that Hegel wishes to find there, our present postmodern hostility to Enlightenment would perhaps appear less fashionable. What might also become clear is that theology without the Absolute is a hopelessly unworkable form of intellectual fiction. The faith of the theologian in this sense requires the "pure insight" of Enlightenment if it is to progress to something more convincing than is currently available. There is no doubt that at this point, above all others, Hegel the theologian and the philosopher was absolutely right, and we are indebted to James Doull for pointing it out