

James Doull On Theology And Public Life

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Let me begin with a personal reminiscence. The incident occurred in the late 1980s when I was a doctoral student in theology. Through a variety of circumstances, it happened that James Doull had read some of my writing relating to Hegel and contemporary theology. We arranged to meet, and had a discussion, in part of that part of my research, in part of my plans for the future. At the end our conversation about the academy and the church, I was asked whether I did not wish to go into politics instead. It was a surprising question, though not a defining moment in any sense. I did not (thanks be to God) become a politician but remained, then as now, an academic and a theologian. I recall the incident in this context mainly because it helps to illustrate something of the extraordinary character of Doull the man, and to make concrete something of his understanding of religion and public life. For throughout his work, Doull took up just this theme, insisting that religion and secularity are not separate but are to be taken together.¹

Now there are various ways in which such a question, and with it, an insistence on the organic relation of secular to religious and vice versa, might in principle have been understood. It could have been intended, for example, that since the real object of religion is the betterment of human existence, and since such betterment is best pursued through secular rather than religious means, that the ultimate upshot of religious principle would best be served by a kind of conversion to the cause of praxis. Equally, but to the contrary, it might have been intended that, contemporary political culture being what it is, public life can only be saved by an infusion of grace, so that a kind of redemption of the secular order from its reckless pride would then be in view. One suspects that the second, rather than the first, comes somewhat nearer the point made by Doull, though in the end we must say that neither of the two options really reflects his thinking. Just what his position was, however, is a rather more difficult thing to state, given the labyrinthine logic of his writings and the difficulty of his prose.

At the outset, then, it might be wise to quote the source, from an essay entitled “The Logic of Theology since Hegel”:

1. Most obviously, in “Secularity and Religion,” *Animus* 7 (2002) - a paper dating, however, from 1973.

It was idle, said Hegel, to look for true religion where there were not true secular institutions. There had come into being a reconciliation of subjective freedom and institutional order which gave experience in the world of the same incarnate Trinitarian reason as was the belief of the Church. ... [However, this] had hardly occurred in Hegel's time when it was succeeded by a new revolution which is still with us.²

In these few, happily perspicuous lines can be recognized the beating heart of Doull's position on the matter in question. Several related ideas stand out. There is, for example, the point already noted, that Doull's philosophy recognizes an authentically Christian expression of the secular state. What would be surprising to the outsider, however, is the idea that this realization in the state of the logic of Christian revelation did not appear earlier, let us say, in the Constantinian triumph of the church, as was once argued by Constantine's "court theologian" Eusebius of Caesarea. Eusebius not only argued that Hellenism in general and the Roman Empire in particular had been a *preparatio evangelii*, but also that Constantine himself as the godly emperor was an image of the eternal Son of God, the *pantocrator*, who mediates God's fearful authority in the world. Thus the political order, for Eusebius, comes at last through Constantine to represent the eternal, spiritual order, and is seen to be grounded in it.

Such theological claims, of course, loom large in critiques of religiously-based politics in our own time (witness, for example, recent coverage of the US Presidential election by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where George W. Bush was described as "a self-confessed born-again Christian" – *quel horreur!*). The assumption is that religion is automatically a corrupting influence in politics, that it leads to moral bias ("intolerance"), and thus to a distortion of political vision. Furthermore, authoritarianism is seen as the inevitable outcome of all attempts to ground politics in religion. It is not only Karl Popper who views religion as an enemy of the open society; critical and feminist theories of the state also take up the refrain. It has thus become an article of faith in liberal and progressive politics that rooting politics in religion is "a very horrid thing" indeed, or that, to paraphrase Popper, we have an obligation at this point not to tolerate the intolerant. Hence, it could be said, the CBC finds itself obliged to describe the winner of the US Presidential election in what are hardly morally neutral terms.

It ought to be striking, therefore, to encounter in Doull a far more eirenic view of the relation of political to religious life. For Doull, furthermore, the key moment in which the realization of Christian revelation in the political sphere occurred was in the context of Enlightenment, the logic of which Doull, following Hegel, explicitly understood to be Christian, an expression of "incarnate Trinitarian reason."³ Implicit in the quotation with which we began a moment ago, then, is the notion that this "authentic reconciliation" of religion and secularity was

2. James Doull, "The Logic of Theology Since Hegel," *Dionysius*, 7 (1983), 129.

3. Something of Doull's understanding of the long historical trajectory of this movement can be traced in James Doull, "The Christian Origin of Contemporary Institutions," *Dionysius*, 4 (1982), 111-165; with its sequel, "Part II: The History of Christian Institutions," *Dionysius*, 8 (1984), 53-103. The study unfortunately appears to be incomplete.

hard won, and a long time in coming - indeed, that it could only have been such. The Constantinian empire, therefore, achieved only a very partial and imperfect realization of the logic of Christian revelation, precisely because it was exclusive of all but the emperor as the locus of divine reason in the political realm; to use Hegelian language, the emperor was free, but none else. The fuller realization appeared, paradoxically, only in Hegel's time with the genesis of the idea of modern political freedom – but this in an age which, on most accounts, reckoned itself to have left the logic of the Christian incarnational and trinitarian revelation behind. The reconciliation, then, whatever it is, is not apparent to all, not even to many or most of the participants in the unfolding drama, but can only be grasped from a more comprehensive standpoint. The fact that the long view is taken in this standpoint ought not to be lost on us, particularly as we consider the import for the present century of the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th, “which, as some Sampson [sic], have brought down in ruins the temple of Christian belief and philosophy.”⁴ In sum, Doull understands his own position and, with it, the entire problematic of the relation of the religious to the secular in our time to be a product of this same history, so that here, we may say, we have a dynamic that is both unintelligible and insoluble apart from the “long view” taken.

One particular feature of the quotation that I wish to note, however, is that Hegel does not say quite what Doull has him say. “It was idle to look for true religion where there were not true secular institutions,” Doull paraphrases, referring in an extended footnote to §552 of the *Enzyklopädie*. The original discussion to which we are here referred concerns the development of the relation in Western thought between religion and the moral fabric of the state. Hegel's ultimate point is that political freedom was to be found in the Protestant state, not in the Catholic state, and this because in Catholicism the God who ought to be known “in spirit and in truth,” is insufficiently related to self-conscious spirit.⁵ Arguing from a polemical treatment of the Tridentine doctrine of the Mass (an argument that appears with great regularity in Hegel's writings), Hegel maintains that a trail of externality, non-spirituality and superstition extends throughout the length and breadth of Catholic piety, binding people under “an externalism by which the very meaning of spirit is perverted and misconceived at its source.”⁶ Relics, for example, are also mentioned. This perversion of spirit is then inevitably expressed also in unfree political institutions, in a “legal and moral bondage,” the reality of which, as Hegel tells us, was apparent in Europe in the early 19th century, where Rome bitterly resisted the new movements for political reform.⁷ The argument, then, is not that it is vain to look for true religion where

4. James Doull, “Heidegger and the State,” unpublished manuscript, p. 5; I have not had access to the published version of this paper in David Peddle and Neil Robertson, eds., *Philosophy and Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

5. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), §552, p. 284.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

7. *Ibid.*

there are not true secular institutions, but quite the reverse: it is idle to look for true secular institutions where there is not true religion:

It is nothing but a modern folly to try to alter a corrupt moral organization by altering its political constitution and code of laws without changing the religion, – to make a revolution without having made a reformation. To suppose that a political constitution opposed to the old religion could live in peace and harmony with it and its sanctities, and that stability could be procured for the laws by external guarantees—at best it is only a temporary expedient—to seek to separate law and justice from religion. Those guarantees are but rotten bulwarks against the consciences of the persons charged with administering the laws – among which laws these guarantees are included. It is indeed the height and profanity of contradiction to seek to bind and subject to the secular code the religious conscience to which mere human law is a thing profane.⁸

For freedom to obtain in the state, therefore, freedom must already obtain in religion. What is meant by freedom in religion in this context can perhaps be put in a number of ways. It is, first and foremost, religion in which what is affirmed is affirmed as truth for self-conscious thought rather than a truth recognized on the basis of external authority. There is a nice illustration of the lengths to which this can be taken in Protestantism in the theology of John Calvin, who in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* discusses, as might be expected, the basis of the authority of holy scripture in theology.⁹ St. Augustine, among others, had taught that one believes on the strength of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, so that faith is itself defined as intellectual assent given on the basis of authority. The church was understood to be the divinely-appointed channel of truth, with a teaching office given it by God.

Medieval scholasticism developed this same idea in relation to the question of the authority of scripture. One believes the teaching of holy scripture on the basis of ecclesiastical authority, technically because the church defines the canon of scripture. Calvin's initial response to this is readily anticipated: the foundations of the church rest on the authority of prophets and apostles – i.e., scripture – rather than scripture upon the church. This is a classic Protestant theme, and Calvin speaks accordingly of the “impiety” of the medieval view. But if one then asks why holy scripture is taken as authoritative by the church, Calvin gives a more surprising answer. Scripture is authoritative by virtue of what Calvin calls the “inner witness of the Holy Spirit,” by which it is affirmed as truth in the consciousness of those believers who together comprise the church. In a certain sense, no reference beyond the believing consciousness is needed, no appeal to external authority, since the point is that the believer is made by grace to perceive the truth himself or herself through the gift of faith.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288.

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, vii.

A second approach to this question might begin with a source more important to Hegel: Martin Luther. There is a pronounced tendency in Luther and in classical Lutheranism generally to claim that God can only be understood at all insofar as what is grasped in God in relation to us. This is known as the *pro me* principle in Lutheran theology, and it is developed in a variety of classical loci in Lutheran thought. For example, in the *Loci Communes* of 1521, Luther's deputy Philipp Melancthon coined the slogan, "*hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere*," which among other things signifies that to speak of the second person of the Trinity known in revelation at all is to speak of the incarnate one, the Word of God in its extraordinary condescension to the creature in time, rather than of some "discarnate" Word of God from all eternity.¹⁰ The most influential and arresting development of the theme, however, occurs in the *Kleiner Catechismus* of Luther, where the three articles of the "Apostles' Creed" are elaborated on in similar fashion. For example, the article, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" is not treated, say, as a claim concerning who or what God is in the divine trinitarian life, or even as an affirmation of confidence that the Holy Spirit is present in the church, but rather, as affirming that one's very believing the first two articles concerning God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord is itself the work of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, the gift of faith is a matter of grace; or, to put the same thing another way, it is God's own doing, and not mine, that I should believe at all.

Hegel, of course, was thoroughly trained in Lutheran theology, and though in his youth he reacted strongly against the arid scholasticism of his theological training, he remained through life a profoundly Lutheran thinker. Indeed, one of the marks of "freedom" which becomes explicit in his understanding of Protestant Christianity is just this classically Lutheran understanding of the trinitarian question. What, after all, would be required in Hegelian terms for the principle of freedom to be realized in a religious position? One would above all require a content that is not an alien imposition on rational consciousness. The content would have to be "ownable" by consciousness itself, in accordance with its own nature, so that, to employ an Hegelian expression in an odd kind of way, spirit would here know itself as all reality. But this would have further implications. Most importantly, if the object of knowledge is God, if God is only knowable on Lutheran terms in his relation to the conscious self, and if God is not alien to thought but is supremely rational, then my very knowledge of God is a divine relation to consciousness. To use more philosophical language, in this knowing content and form would need to be identical, and both would need to be infinite, so that here at last thought might have an "adequate idea."

Hegel's argument, we have seen, was that the free political order coming into existence in his time had clear roots in Protestant Christianity. The claim made by Doull is that this "Protestant" principle of spiritual freedom has been internalized in our culture in a variety of ways outside the bounds of religion as such. In a manner of speaking, we are all Protestants now. Doull, then, adapts Hegel's argument to his own purposes, though undoubtedly in the light of the shape of the development of nineteenth and twentieth century culture, but in this context, it

10. Much the same position is developed in relation to the knowledge of God in general by Calvin in *Institutes*, I, 2.

is interesting to note that he does reverse Hegel's line of thought. It is as if Doull wants us to see that today, in a context in which the principle of spiritual freedom has been thoroughly secularized, an index to the adequacy of a given theological culture can best be found in the political institutions to which that theology is attached.

Thus the sheer existence of a society like ours, in which the sovereign individual rather than an objective order of law and truth takes central place, indicates that our religion has to be similarly distorted, that in our thought and practice alike we are not found in a right relation with God. The current debate concerning the legal definition of marriage in Canada and the United States provides an excellent example of this, for in this debate, churches are found in the vanguard of the defence of the principle of subjective freedom. Now a consistent Hegelianism would suggest that no alteration of a political or legal system is possible except on the basis of a correlative alteration in religious understanding, since the ultimate sanction for law is conscience, and since at this point the inner truth and moving force of both religion and law are found to be one and the same. Doull unquestionably takes this view, and it is partly for this reason that he seeks to take theology so seriously, not out of an antiquarian or private interest, but as a question of the utmost public concern. His little reversal of the order of Hegel's thought concerning the relation of religion to secular institutions, on the other hand, seems to indicate that the converse is also true: that there can be no adequate treatment of the religious question in our context that does not grapple with the notion that a religious principle of spiritual freedom has been expanded to become the dominant culture in global civilization.

Anyone at all familiar with the shape of Doull's philosophy will know the thrust of his thesis concerning the development of Christian theology after Hegel. As a religious thinker, Hegel is understood to have provided a philosophical account of the divine outreach by which God and humankind are reconciled, and by which the mediation of this reconciliation in the incarnation is recognized and lived in the Spirit. In Hegel's philosophical system, there is an all-important recognition that God, or more specifically the logos of God, is not something alien to humanity, but is by virtue of its specific historical mediation in Jesus Christ the inmost truth of human existence. Both to and from this "seminal" logos, as we might put it, the whole of human history pulsates with life, circulating ceaselessly and with ever-clearer rhythms. Hegel takes the view, however, that this incarnate and spiritual principle that is historically mediated would be neither divine nor spiritual were it found exclusively in Christian consciousness or faith. To be what it is revealed as being, it must be in all things both in time and in eternity.

The great theme of Doull's philosophy is to expand upon this vision, and to find in post-Hegelian philosophy a development by which the same seminal principle continues to work itself out. By this very logic, a "revolution" occurred in the philosophy and theology of the 19th and 20th centuries, as a result of which the consciousness of this mediation of the divine reason was submerged. Both in its existentialist-subjectivist adaptation in Kierkegaard and his heirs, and in the tradition of Feuerbach and of subsequent humanism, it is assumed on the one side that the rational mediation of the divine is purely mythological, and yet, paradoxically, on the other, that the "myth" mediated, the attitude of spirit according to which the Absolute is not something alien to humanity, is nevertheless still to be assumed. To cite an argument repeatedly encountered in Doull's work, what this entails is not quite what the 19th and 20th century revolutionaries intended. In Hegelian logic, no negation stands on its own; rather, all negation assumes and

logically contains what is negated. Thus the position advanced does not, and cannot, ultimately have abandoned the incarnate trinitarian reason it claims to have rejected. The upshot is that what in Hegel's terms was understood as the result of a long historical, theological and philosophical mediation is now present in a hidden form, as a kind of presupposition implicit and unrecognized, and for this very reason all the more potent. Rather than being a negation of Christian culture, the revolution contains the structures of Christian belief implicitly in itself.

This also, however, is the source of Doull's fundamental optimism concerning the future of Christian theology. According to Doull, who it seems to me never wrung his hands in despair over this question but insisted again that we take the long historical view, the recognition that humanity is not something absolute of itself is logically as well as existentially inevitable, since the notion of such an independent humanity is unsustainable, even farcical. Though the mediation of God as understood in the Christian religion has fallen on hard times, paradoxically, it is not un-present in the general outlook of our time and in the intellectual systems that surround. To take a trivial but pervasive example, when our media use language arguably inspired by Strauss and Feuerbach to speak of charity as "humanitarianism," the fall from a more robust Christian humanism is only apparent. The reason, after all, why the word "humanitarian" is used to connote the moral Good in our culture is because our culture implicitly recognizes human nature as the locus of the absolute Good itself, so that not only is "the divine" in "human nature" in some generic sense, but there is a concrete human nature in God. Only a culture that has taken from Christian faith the idea of the infinite *caritas* of God, welling up in human history in the extraordinary fashion that it does, can say so. For us to recognize this, however, is already in a small measure for the Christian religion to have made its return from exile, where it may then await the return of its own prodigal child, contemporary secularity.

The problem, however, is that the partial, one-sided—Hegel would say abstract—grasp of this in contemporary culture as a presupposition rather than as the result of a mediation means that culturally, we labour in our thinking under a very considerable handicap. For Doull, we are rather like people hopping along on one leg, convinced that we have no need of two; such hopping can be done, obviously, but it is a less than elegant mode of transport, and one that can frequently lead to injury. The use of the leg on which we stand together with the other it is meant to accompany would be vastly preferable, but that would require that the other leg, the forgotten and disused one, be valued for what it is. To return to my more concrete example, contemporary humanism would be far more secure in itself, less open to abuse or distortion, and a good deal more compelling, were it not suspended in mid-air without foundation, and were its real roots understood.

This is not to say, however, that secular humanism is altogether a bad thing. Here I return to a point made earlier. One important feature of Doull's approach to these matters is his optimism. Just as the Absolute, in Hegel, must pass over into its opposite in order precisely to be itself, it seems that, in Doull's adaptation of Hegelian principle to post-Hegelian history, the divine must similarly empty itself into the secular, again, in order to be itself. Through the "revolution" there will be, then, on Doull's reading, a realization of the Christian religion beyond that of earlier times, just as, in Hegel's philosophy itself, there was also such a realization as a result of Enlightenment's painful consciousness of the "death of [the old] God." By this token, then, the religious sources must be enriched, and must thus be seen in a new light, by virtue of

their secular translation. That is to say, the realization of a truly free secular culture is to be seen as a profoundly Christian concern, the outworking of the incarnational and trinitarian logic of the Christian revelation. If in the realization of secular freedom Christianity has suffered a kind of death, it was so that it might live again, comprehending this secular freedom in some richer way in itself.

James Doull quite clearly took the view that the renewal of our political culture and public institutions cannot take place without a renewal in religion. It was for this reason that, as a philosopher with an avid commitment to the quality of our secular institutions, he took so seriously the task of theology and the life of the Christian church. I should also like to say, however, that it was as a Christian that Doull was equally committed to the quality of public life, and that the two sides of this are inseparable. This was, I think, the reason for the query with which I began, the question posed to the young theologian whether he ought not to enter politics. The point was that a theology that speaks of the incarnation of God, which insists that even death, the apex of finitude, is not something alien to God, must engage with this *saeculum* on its own terms. What is at stake in not doing so is nothing less than the very universality of truth, or “incarnate Trinitarian reason,” as Doull puts it. The fact that existential theology has mainly resigned from its public obligations, and the fact that the theology of praxis has proven unable to relate itself to the content of Christian trinitarian faith, are seen as evidences of the one-sidedness of Christianity since the time of Hegel, of the abstraction that it has become.

Here, finally, it seems to me that there is much constructive work to be done, indeed, a mountain to be climbed. However, there is reason to think that the kind of comprehensive effort required to reassess the Christian roots of Western political consciousness might today, for the first time in a very long time, be received with public interest. For the question of the relation of religion to politics is today alive and well in the geopolitical sphere. It is likely to be among the most important questions facing the human race in the present century. I refer, of course, to the contemporary conflict between the West and Islam. It is not insignificant that the roots of this conflict can be traced in some ways to a crisis in Islam generated by its encounter since Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt with Western ideas of spiritual and political freedom. On the one side, there is the fact that the excesses of “abstract” freedom are understandably repellent to Muslims; on the other, there is the contemporary insistence in radical Islam that law and politics are theological through and through, and that law in particular is divine and not human. Against these claims stand the Hegelian theme that the concrete concept of freedom is something infinitely richer, and a profoundly Christian concern, that must have implication for the questions of political life.

Informed theological treatments of the roots of freedom in contemporary Christian thought are surprisingly rare. All the more reason, therefore, for a renewal in political theology that takes our theme seriously, and that takes up the question that in so many respects lies at the centre of James Doull’s own philosophy. Perhaps it must be though a painful encounter with a religious culture which denies the concept of freedom in the specific sense developed in Hegel’s thought, and this nowhere more clearly than in its conception of legal and political institutions, that the Western world can rediscover something of its own distinctive wisdom.