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Trinitarian theology: Hegelian *Vis-À-Vis* Advaitic

In order to understand Hegel's contribution to the understanding of the Trinity properly we have to go back to Plato's arguments concerning the absoluteness and inexpressibility of God. For Plato it is impossible to think and express the unity of God, because our thinking is limited and determined by the discrimination of subject and predicate, which means duality in any case. To express God as subject can be done only in a predicative determination. Since the realm of the predicate is always wider than the realm of the subject, it is impossible to go beyond this contradiction. God is one (*hén estin*). But in this sentence the "is" is only copulative and not an expression of existence since otherwise the One would participate in Being, which presupposes dualism.¹ This One (*hén*) does not have any name nor can it be known, because it is the subject of any knowledge.²

This is the origin of all following *theologia negativa* which has come via neoplatonism to many Fathers of the Church such as Clement, Origen, the Cappadozian fathers, and especially Dionysius, the Areopagite. Due to this line of thinking Plato has played a considerable part in the genesis of the doctrine of the Trinity. To think the Oneness of God means in the strict sense to think him as the One (*to hén*; Sanskrit: *tad ekam*), which is logically impossible, because the One stands above Being as well as above any other qualification. If I want to *speak* about God I have to think about him as the being One (*hén estin*).³ This means he participates in Being

1. Plato, *Parmenides*, 137 c.

2. Plato, *Parmenides*, 142 a.

3. Plato, *Parmenides*, 142 b Plato indicates the difference in giving the first "*estin*" no accent and thus indicating the copulative, whereas the second "*estin*" bears an accent indicating the ontological statement.

(*metichei*), which implies duality. Hence the One is not thought. The Absolute becomes relative when thought. This means that the absoluteness of God means his inexpressibility. Between the first *hén estin* and the second *hen éstin* in Plato there is a similar relationship as between the *nirguṇa brahman* and the *saguṇa brahman*. The same problem is at issue. Both systems of thought have difficulties in making the transition from the first to the second position intelligible. In Advaita Vedānta the undeterminable *māyā* is mediating, whereas Plato—at least in his *Parmenides*—puts one position next to the other rather abruptly.⁴

The Trinitarian notion of God could contribute to a solution if the Trinity could be interpreted non-dualistically. Already the early Fathers have said that concerning God neither static attributes nor passions nor affects can be thought because of the absolute unity of God.⁵ However, it is precisely the intention of the notion of the Trinity to integrate the many into Oneness. The unity of the Trinitarian God is not a One which would be abstracted from the Many and would lead into dualism, as this cannot be avoided in Plato, for example. This would be—according to Hegel—a “bad infinity”, non-unity. The unity of the Trinitarian God is rather an infinite power of integration to unify the Many into One without being identical or different from the Many: God is the integration of all difference. In his unity it is in infinite relationships due to his power of integration. In this light we have to understand all affirmations concerning God. All of reality can express God insofar as God as the unifying Whole is transparent through it. There is no need for a special or specific language or symbolism, but the whole reality is in God and can, therefore, express him. But God is infinitely more than any symbol or the reality as a whole. The reality is in him, but he is not the reality. The spatial part gets its meaning from the whole, not *vice versa*.

Concerning the unity of the Trinitarian efficacy of God, every expression about God is likewise appropriate or inadequate. This includes the *via negativa* as well as the *via eminential* and the *via*

4. Other sayings (cf. the Diotima Speech) tend towards a mediation in a totally different sense. Cf. A. Speiser, *Ein Parmenideskommentar*, (Leipzig: 1937), p. 26.

5. Tertullian, Adv. Vol. 4: Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 1,12,2.

causalitatis. The determination of an expression as being adequate or inadequate cannot be made formally on the basis of this expression alone. It depends on the context and the attitude of the one who makes this expression. In other words, we have to consider the experiential character of our encounter with God. Without going further into detail at this point, we can now proceed to analyse Hegel's doctrine of the Trinity. In his doctrine of the Trinity Hegel takes his stand firmly in the classical tradition, though he reinterprets some important points. The doctrine of the Trinity is an integral part of his system and can be understood properly only in this connection. We want to clarify only a few points.

Hegel starts with his criticism of Kant's dualism. The "Thing in itself" remains an abstract "other one" in relation to the world of experiences and phenomena. It is for itself. Hence, reality is split into two realities which are more or less unrelated.⁶ At this point Hegel introduces his Dialectical Logic. It is the Self-expression of the Absolute before all differentiation into matter and spirit etc. Its content is this One, the "true matter".⁷ The Absolute is unity of Being and Non-Being, that is on the level of reflection the unity of identity and non-identity.⁸ That both Being and Non-Being have to be thought as unity means that they cannot be abstracted, that one is determined by the other. Thus, there is an essential relationship between both determinations: "Truth is neither Being nor Nothing, but that Being in Nothing and Nothing in Being—does not pass over—but has passed over".⁹ Both are at the same time absolutely different and inseparable. Each of them disappears into its contrary, and what we can think, is the result of this process. The Absolute is this Becoming. Being and Nothing are only the abstract moments of Becoming; they are in total relation to each other, identical yet

6. G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Vol. I, Berlin:1971), p. 28f.

7. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 31: "but a matter, which does not have the form as an external, because this matter is rather the pure thought, thus the absolute form itself. The Logic is therefore the system of pure reason, to be comprehended as the realm of pure thought. *This realm is the truth as it is without veil being in and for itself.* Therefore it can be said that its content is the *representation of God as he is in his eternal being before the creation of nature and finite spirit.*"

8. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

9. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

different. To think a difference of Being and Nothing means to apply certain determinations which would be relative and not any more absolute. In this way neither Being nor Nothing would be thought.¹⁰ To think this unity is the task of Dialectics which is "the higher reasonable movement in which such entities, which seem to be totally separated, pass over into each other by itself, by what they are thus abolishing the precondition of their separation. It is in the dialectical immanent nature of Being and Nothing itself, that they show their unity, the Becoming as their truth".¹¹

What Hegel wants to say here becomes even clearer in understanding the contraposition which Hegel himself indicates: Parmenides wants to think only Being. Nothing is not. Hence, he puts forth a dualism of Being and Nothing which became important for the whole later history of Western thinking. The Being is the absolute indiscernible One. This Being cannot be determined and it cannot act because this would require determination. Therefore Being remains empty. It cannot be said how to proceed from this beginning, how to think reality under those circumstances. Indeed, at least in Plato's Parmenides, you have to overcome this first position totally in order to find a new starting point. Yet, this implies a certain dualism. If Being is thought as abstract One, all movement has to come from outside, from a second, even relative, principle. This is a contradiction in itself.¹²

Hegel refers here to the same problem which can hardly be solved in *Advaita Vedānta*, according to my understanding: How can the absolute One (*nirguṇa brahman*) pass over into its unfoldment or display called *saguṇa brahman*? Even if we do not speak of a real unfoldment but conceive of the difference as illusion superimposed on our mind, we have to explain how it is possible that this illusion is superimposed. The answer is: it is the creative but veiling power of *māyā*. But what then is the relationship between the absolute One (*nirguṇa brahman*) and this dynamic principle called *māyā*? Does the One remain absolute? Whatever may be the answer, a relative duality cannot be excluded. And this is precisely the point in favour of Hegel's argumentation. Becoming and perishing penetrate each other

10. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 77f.

11. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

12. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 80f.

in the same way as Being and Nothing disappear in each other. Becoming and perishing are the same. They describe the one process which is caused by the relating of opposites, only each from the other's standpoint. Becoming is a shapeless "unrest, which returns into a calm result". It is not the Nothing, because in this case there would be an opposite of Being, Then "the unity of Being and Nothing would become a calm simplicity".¹³

Taking into account these considerations Hegel derives his contraposition towards Kant: The "Thing in itself" is in the appearance. This is an ontological statement. The Thing in itself is the true being of the appearance, it is the infinite in the finite¹⁴ and as such not separated from the appearance or the finite, respectively. The infinite is the nature of the finite itself, there is nothing outside of it, no second. Otherwise the infinite would not have been thought, but would be a relativity of dual entities which would make the notion of the infinite absurd. The Absolute is not outside the appearance but in it as its negative, and *vice versa*. That is why it is not simply the appearance, but precisely the negation. Being the negation, however, it is its true being, not strange to the finite, as it were.¹⁵ If we do think the finite beside the infinite we would always imply this certain dualism and get only a "bad infinity" which would mean only a quantitative extension of the finite, remaining in relativity. It would be "finite infinity",¹⁶ which could transcend the relative only relatively. Hegel's point is that we have to go beyond this manner of reflection which remains always in its own circle.¹⁷

If the dualism between infinity and the finite, between God and man is not overcome, there cannot be human freedom. Because if God is the all determining reality, and yet he has his limit at the self-determination of man it would contradict the absoluteness of God. But if the infinite is recognized, as the true being of the finite, if the unity of both is established, we could conceive of human freedom as the realization of the freedom of God.¹⁸

13. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

14. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 108; 127ff.

15. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

16. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

17. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

18. L. Oeing-Hanhoff, "Hegels Trinitatslehre", in *Theologie und Philosophie* 52, 3 (Feiburg:1977), p. 384.

It is Hegel's intention to overcome these dualistic contradictions. He tries to solve the problem by means of the Christian Trinitarian notion of God as the means for a dialectical concept of reality. That the infinite is in the finite does not mean, that we speak of the power of a strange presence, but it is inherent in the finite to pass over itself, to transcend itself: this is its infinity.¹⁹ Hegel sees the true infinity in the Becoming of the Trinitarian God where the triplicity produces and represents the single moments of this process. His whole Logic is the exhibition of this Becoming which he conceives as the self-realization of God. That is why this process is the revelation of God, and the Dialectical Logic is the genuine report of this revelation. Logic is the science of revelation.²⁰ The doctrine of the Trinity reflects the self-representation of God which can be expressed in dialectical negations. The whole process of the world actually is the revelation of God which has to be seen under three determinations.²¹

The First determination is that God is seen in his eternity before the creation of the world. Here, God thinks himself, he is "unmoved silence." This is the Kingdom of the Father.

The second determination is that God creates the world and hence sets forth separation and discrimination. God appears in a special way. He negates his being in and for himself (*An-und-für-sich-Sein*) and goes into appearance, which would be an illusion if thought as something beside God. The above-mentioned dialectics of infinity and finite becomes useful here up to the radicality of the death of God. (Because the once put difference has to be abolished again in the negation of negation.)²² This is the reconciliation of the

19. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 135: "The finite is not negated by the infinite as an external power, but it is its infinity to negate itself."

20. Hegel, *op. cit.*, pp. 138, 142. With this argumentation Hegel refers to some examples in the Christian tradition. Especially Scotus Eriugena thinks God as the infinite one who mediates the finite with himself in the Trinitarian process. Cf. F. Chr. Baur, *Die christliche Lehre von der Dreieinigkeit und Menschwerdung Gottes in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Vol. II, Tübingen:1842), p. 293f.

21. Cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (Lasson) Vol. II. *Die absolute Religion*, Hamburg 1966, p. 30f.

22. E. Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen:1977), p. 123f. says: It is Hegel's special contribution to develop the "theology of the crucified one as a doctrine of the triune God" philosophically.

infinite with the finite in unity. This second determination is the kingdom of the Son.

The third determination is the result of the negation of the particularity. Thus, what has appeared historically, particularly in the second determination is negated into the Spirit of the community. The special reconciliation is negated into the general or universal as the determination of negation of negation. This is the kingdom of the Spirit.

God is Spirit, which is in the continuous movements of its coming to itself. And "God as Spirit is essentially this: to be for another, to reveal itself; he does not create the world once, but is the eternal creator, the eternal revealing. This is he the pure *actus*: this is his notion, his determination".²³ Creation, redemption etc. are moments of this one process of self-revelation in the same way as the three persons of the Trinity are determinations of the one process of the "self-creation" of God, who reveals himself in this process as Spirit. God as Spirit is the precondition for this process, but being Spirit he is also and at the same time the result, insofar as in the third determination he has integrated the infinity and the finite. Or, as Hegel says elsewhere: "He is the subject of the movement and he is also the movement itself".²⁴

God is the event in which he completes himself, that is, Trinitarian life. And he is at the same time the subject of this event. This is the meaning of the doctrine of the unity of the Trinity, which is also an event differentiated threefold in its particular moments. This is also the way to mediate the infinite and the finite without going into dualistic differentiations. Hegel finds the first example for this Trinitarian reality in self-consciousness, which is as being-reflected-in-itself result of a process, in which the above explained Trinitarian notions are immanent.²⁵

God is Spirit, and as such the subject of the process in which he produces himself. This means: he is personality.²⁶ Personality here does not mean an individual centre and as such a separated entity.

23. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

24. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hoffmeister) (Leipzig:1949), p. 546f.

25. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, p. 148.

26. Hegel, *Philosophie der Religion, op. cit.*, p. 57.

Personality is rather absolute subjectivity in Paul Tillich's terms—a centre of freedom having power over itself. Person is relationship. The personality of God is his perfect interrelatedness. There is no separation between God and the world but interrelation and interpenetration between them. However, since God is not dependent at all, he is the centre for all interrelation. He determines interrelatedness. This means he *is* freedom.

As subject reflected in itself, of which single moments are the three Trinitarian “persons”, he is only one personality. In the discrimination of the Father and the Son and the interchange of both we have love.²⁷ That is why only the Trinity as a whole can be personality. The notion of personality corresponds with the notion of freedom. But only God as the result mediated with itself is freedom, not the single moments of this dialectical process.²⁸ Because of the rational unity of the Trinitarian notion God can be thought as self-discriminating yet identical with himself. This relationship marks the identity of the divine history. God as Trinitarian history has to be seen in its three forms.²⁹

First, God is “the eternal being in and with himself”, he is being in and for himself, not yet realized in appearance. Concerning our spatial understanding, this means that he is beyond, apart from the world of finite beings. Concerning our temporal understanding, this means that he is beyond time “as eternal idea in the element of the pure thought of eternity.” He is God the Father. Second, God is the form of appearance, the particularity, the being for others. Hence, he is related, understandable and actual. He is historical being, spatially under historical circumstances and temporally under the modifications of past, present and future. He is God the Son. Third, God is the form of return from appearance towards himself. He is God as subject of the process, which is present in the finite appearance, namely, in the human consciousness of the congregation. He is present as present reality which tends towards perfection in the future. He is God the Spirit.

God is actuality in determining himself, becoming actual and dying to this actualization again in order to delimit the appearance of

27. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 57f.

28. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 61: “Personality is freedom.”

29. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 65f.

himself into spiritual universality. Hegel responds to this in the Phenomenology: "The death of the mediator taken up by the Self is the negation of his objectivity or his spatial being for himself; this particular being for himself has become universal self-consciousness."³⁰ This is the old idea of the *theopoiosis* of man in the form of dialectical logic!

No doubt, Hegel conceives of the Trinitarian notion in relation with the revelation which is actual in Jesus Christ. But only in this argument as described here does revelation make sense for Hegel: "The reconciliation in Christ which is believed does not make sense without God being the triune God: that he is, but also as the other is, as the self-discriminating one, so that this other is God himself, has the divine nature in itself, and that this negation of the difference, the being other, that this return of love is the Spirit. This understanding means that faith is not a relationship towards something subordinate, but towards God himself."³¹

The Trinitarian God is Spirit. Both the origin as well as the result (the determination of the third "person") are called Spirit. The Third is the first and the first is the third, because the process of the divine life is not external but internal. It is "nothing other than the play of self-preservation, of making sure of itself,"³² The result of the inner-trinitarian process is, that God attains self-consciousness by means of his history. The world history which we can observe is nothing else than the external aspect of this inner-trinitarian process.

These are some of the basic points of Hegel's doctrine of the Trinity. Four problems seem to be of special interest with regard to our topic:

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is for Hegel a possibility to overcome ontological dualism. The Absolute, that is, God as Spirit, is the One Reality which is displayed in a three fold self-movement, coming to itself. First, God is pure substance or content of his own

30. Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, p. 545f.

31. Hegel, *Philosophie der Religion*, p. 173f. The last sentence shows again, that faith in Christ requires the Trinitarian understanding of God because of soteriological reasons. Cf. Jüngel, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

32. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

consciousness, then he passes over into the becoming other, that is, into a synthesis with limited determinations which he sets forth from himself. He incarnates himself as limited human being in order to return into the spiritual unity of self-consciousness. Hegel illustrates these moments as each a perfect circle, and that is why God is perfect even in each moment, for "his extensive movement is therefore this, to display in each of his moments as elements his nature."³³

In the terminology of *Advaita Vedānta* this could mean: The eternal self-movement of the Absolute (*brahman*) goes through the moments of *nirguṇa brahman* and *saguṇa brahman* in order to know itself in a third mediated state in order to negate the objectivity of the *saguṇa brahman* into pure subjectivity of the Whole which is reflected in itself but now perfectly as rest. This third step is significantly enough, not known to *Advaita Vedānta*, and it would be also hardly possible to speak of a "self-movement" of *brahman*, since these appearances are due to *māyā*. Therefore, they cannot be conceived of as history of the Absolute. But for Hegel, the Absolute is subject, which is self-movement, whereas the *nirguṇa brahman* in Hegel's sense would be substance, which rests in itself and is always for itself.³⁴

However, there are sufficient indications that in *Advaita Vedānta* the Absolute could be regarded as subject in Hegel's sense, namely, when the Absolute is *sat* (Being) which is at the same time *cit* (pure consciousness) and-in this reflection in itself- *ānanda* (bliss). Yet, as far as I can see, these self-expressions of the Absolute are not meant to be taken with regard to the relationship of the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa brahman*.

2. For Hegel the Trinitarian history is real and ontologically valid. Thus, the negation of dualism in world history is also a real process for Hegel. The differences are regarded as already come away with. The question is whether this view is verifiable and in accordance with our real historical situation. The Left-Hegelians have denied this, and they started in fact to do away the differences because in view of our real experience "the moment of difference . . . cannot be extinguished without making reconciliation a cynical-reactionary

33. Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, p. 533.

34. Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 19f.

slogan."³⁵ Indeed, Hegel thinks reality as history, but he does not think the real history. And that is the reason why the dualism which Hegel wanted to overcome is brought in again at the existential level.

Advaita Vedānta does not identify God with his self-realization in revelation. Both are non-dual (*advaita*), but they are aspects of our understanding. Our understanding depends on the degree of realization of the Spirit or Self. We are not perfect, so according to *Advaita Vedānta*, perfection can be expected without splitting reality dualistically. Perfection or non-perfection are not a matter of ontological but of gnoseological (or psychological) considerations. This is definitely an impressive view. Yet, this demands our acceptance that the self-movement of God or creation is not real in the ontological sense of the term. Hegel's idea, that this self-movement of God be a play of love with itself, could be understood as *māyā*. Yet, in *Advaita Vedānta* it is precisely only the play of *māyā* as distinct from the unmoved One. For Hegel, it is important to note that movement is achieved by the on-going negation of one moment into the other.³⁶ Therefore, the process of God is a change into the "death of God", which, indeed, is the end of an "empty beyond" and indicates definitely the end of any dualistic metaphysics as the result of the history of God.³⁷ This last argument is impossible for *Advaita Vedānta*. For Hegel, non-dualism is the result of a real process, in Christian terms: non-dualism is the eschatological result of the history of God in its Trinitarian process. For *Advaita Vedānta* non-dualism is the experience of the true nature of reality which is, has been and will be. It is achieved when the veil of our dualistic understanding is removed by the *advaitic* experience.

3. In Hegel's approach there is a tendency to think God not as Trinity, but in a binitarian way. Hegel thinks about the relationship of Father and Son as being one in the other, this means in terms of the Greek *perichōrēsis*. The Spirit is the union of both in love, but

35. P. Cornehl, *Die Zukunft der Versöhnung: Eschatologie und Emanzipation in der Aufklärung, bei Hegel und in der Hegelschen Schule* (Göttingen: 1971), p. 356f.

36. C. F. V. Weizsäcker, "Zu Hegels Dialektik", in *Der Garten des Menschlichen. Beiträge zur geschichtlichen Anthropologie* (München: 1977), p. 356f.

37. M. Heidegger, *Nietzsches Wort: "Gott ist tot"*, in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: a.M. 1963), p. 200.

this does not constitute really the third "person" of the Trinity, but only the relationality of Father and Son.³⁸ Because Hegel understands the whole Trinitarian Becoming as Spirit, he cannot think the third moment as "person" in the same sense as the first (Father) and the second (Son). This, however, has tremendous consequences for the understanding of the freedom of God. In order to be able to think the ability for decision in God, we have to discriminate between divine knowledge and divine will. And precisely this was done by scholastic theology by means of the doctrine of the Trinity.³⁹ Only if a priority of the known over the wanted is established in God, the realization of creation can be understood as free choice among various other known possibilities. Where the discrimination of knowledge and will in God is not made, creation could not be understood as a free act of God, because freedom includes choice. God's freedom would be inferior to human freedom, that is the notion of freedom would not make sense with regard to God. Hegel's philosophy can be interpreted in such a way, that at least it views this problem as not sufficiently solved. The reason is that unity and threefold differentiation in God are not balanced sufficiently.⁴⁰

4. On the other hand, "revelation of the Trinitarian life of God is the essential condition for the possibility of full human freedom".⁴¹ Because human freedom means that man surrenders himself into the objective event of the Spirit and is determined by it, the particular existence is negated into the universality of the Spirit. Thus, human freedom as participation in the freedom of the Trinitarian God, which is mediated, which itself becomes a possible experience. Therefore, the individual gains infinite dignity, because it is negated in God. It is a moment of the process of the self-realization of God. Human freedom would be the appearance of the infinite in the finite. And this means—in view of the principles of Dialectical Logic—that any dualism or any mutual limitation of human and divine freedom is transcended. Divine freedom realizes itself in the Trinitarian Becoming, and human freedom is the realization of divine freedom under the aspect of the limited and finite existence. But the act of freedom as such is already the negation of the finite, the return from the parti-

38. Oeing-Hanhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 391f.

39. Thomas Aquinas, 1 *Sent.* 14.1.1; cf. Oeing-Hanhoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-395.

40. Oeing-Hanhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 394f.

41. Oeing-Hanhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

cular in to the infinity or universality of God: human freedom is the expression as well as the form of realization of God who is Spirit.

Man is not God. But man is one moment in the self-realization of God. Man is relative to God, but in his individuality he is of infinite dignity, because in him the freedom of God determines itself. For Hegel, we can summarize now, God and man are neither identical nor different. Indeed, they are not—two, *advaita*.

The basic difference between Hegel and *Advaita Vedānta* is. That in *Advaita Vedānta* the individuality cannot be understood as an essential moment of God. Man, who has realized the *ātman* as the true nature of his being and has returned non-dualistically into God, did not undergo a real process nor did he realize himself participating in a greater and more comprehensive process. He has transcended only the illusion of individuality. That is why in *Advaita Vedānta* human freedom cannot be a polarity for the freedom of God, dialectically mediated. Human freedom becomes real only, when it is totally one with the freedom of God, regardless of all individual and finite particularities. This understanding makes freedom a fact and guarantees, finally, the freedom of choice.