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Hegelianism: A Pervading Theological Influence

David Muthukumar .S

I. Introduction

Hegel's was one of the seminal minds that contributed to the philosophical world in a phenomenal way. His philosophical thoughts were widely received as well as criticized in his own time and in the ensuing period after his death. Hegel grappled with a wider range of topics such as history of philosophy, logic and metaphysics, and the philosophies of history, art, right, and religion. His literary output and impact are compared to that of the ancient philosopher Aristotle. As a Christian by faith persuasion and as a Lutheran by denomination, most of Hegel's insights had theology or Christianity as its focal point. Hegelianism, as a philosophical method emerged after Hegel. Many of the theologian-philosopher successors of Hegel employed his philosophical methods in their reflections. But often they took contradictory positions and claimed that as of Hegel's position. In this short essay, we will attempt to get a glimpse of the main themes of Hegel's philosophy and the Hegelian influence in its varied contours in the history of Biblical theology.

II. Main Themes in Hegel's Philosophy

a. Phenomenology of Mind

Phenomenology of Mind is one of the classical literary outputs by Hegel in which he portrays various stages of human consciousness from mere sense awareness to absolute knowledge.¹ It is a study of appearances, images and illusions throughout the history of human consciousness. 'Phenomenon' is a word which refers to appearances. It's a Greek word used by Plato to distinguish mere temporal appearances from the eternal *Noumena* of the Ideal Realm. In Hegel's view, we can only know Reality when we have completely mastered the appearances, since the appearances (phenomena) partially hide and partially reveal Reality (*noumena, Geist*) in a peculiar manner.² There are degrees of reality within various phenomena. This is the origin of Hegel's idea that there can be degrees of truth in propositions. There are material phenomena and there are mental phenomena. Phenomena of mind also partially hide and partially reveal the truth. The study of phenomena is called, phenomenology, and Hegel focuses on mental phenomena, hence the title, *Phenomenology Of Mind*.

1 H.B. Acton, "Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Ed. Paul Edwards, (London: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967), p.438

2 Ibid.

b. Philosophy of History

Hegel struggled with Kant's radical division between subject and object, between thought and life, which implies that morals can only be determined formally.³ Life in society is therefore dependent on an external law that is irrationally posited. And this implies a contradiction and dichotomy between the moral subject's morality and the law and life of society.⁴ So, Personal freedom and society become mutually exclusive. This dualism also disengages philosophy from any contribution to the actual form of society. Hegel was intensely interested in a renewal of society, in church, state and morality, based on new ideas.⁵ Hegel attains the unification of subject and object by conceiving of reality as a process.⁶ Because both subject and object are involved in this process, the process is common to both and therefore unites them. The attention therefore shifts from the perception the subject has of the object, to the act of perceiving. Also the shift is from concentrating on the parts to attempting to see the whole process of history. Hegel therefore constructs a philosophy of history. He sees in history a movement which alternates between opposites (i.e. it is dialectical).⁷ In this movement between opposites, the unification of opposites as part of the process is more and more achieved. Hegel attempts to envision this process as a whole, and to demonstrate that this whole is rational. The process of history is described by Hegel as the confrontation of any thesis (position) in history with its antithesis.⁸ The conflict between these is sublated by a synthesis of both, carrying both positions in it as poles. This synthesis then acts as a new thesis for the process to continue with a new antithesis, and so on. The rational description of the whole of the historical process would contain in itself the reason for everything. This reason, according to Hegel, would be the ultimate truth.⁹ This process, as the ultimate truth, is at the same time the ultimate spirit - God. God is now not conceived of as an objectifiable being above the world. Thus through philosophic history, Hegel argues that the "substance" or content of world history is nothing but Reason, since all of history is caused and guided by a rational process.¹⁰ In "the course of history," through the process, the Ultimate Spirit moves, changes, and transforms itself through the progression of historical events.

c. Dialectical Method

In the Hegelian process of change, a concept or its realization passes over into and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite. The development is through the stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in accordance with the laws of dialectical materialism.¹¹ Any systematic reasoning, exposition, or argument that juxtaposes opposed or contradictory ideas and seeks to resolve their conflict - the dialectical tension or opposition between two interacting forces or elements follows Dialectical method.¹²

To describe the activity of overcoming the negative, Hegel also often used the term *Aufhebung*, variously translated into English as "sublation" or "overcoming" to conceive of the working of the

3 Detlev Tonsing, "Importance of Hegel for Contemporary Theology", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, p.57 (from ATLA accessed on 04/07/2010)

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 H.B. Acton, "Hegel, p.436

7 Ibid.

8 Michael Inwood, "Hegel", *Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, Ed. Nicholas Bunnan and E.P. Tsui-James, (Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), p. 746.

9 "Hegel", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Chicago: William Benton Publisher, 1968), p.302

10 Ibid.

11 <http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/05/dialectic.htm> accessed on 06/07/2010

12 Ibid.

dialectic.¹³ Roughly, the term indicates preserving the useful portion of an idea, thing, society, etc., while moving beyond its limitations. In the *Logic*, for instance, Hegel describes a dialectic of existence: first, existence must be posited as pure Being; but pure Being, upon examination, is found to be indistinguishable from Nothing. When it is realized that what is coming into being is, at the same time, also returning to nothing (in life, for example, one's living is also a dying), both Being and Nothing are united as Becoming.¹⁴

Another important principle for Hegel within the Dialectic system is the negation of the negation, which he also terms *Aufhebung* (sublation). Something is only what it is in its relation to another, but by the negation of the negation this something incorporates the other into itself. The dialectical movement involves two moments that negate each other. As a result of the negation of the negation, "something becomes an other; In becoming there are two moments: coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be: by sublation. What is sublated on the one hand ceases to be and is put to an end, but on the other hand it is preserved and maintained. In dialectics, a totality transform itself and it is "self-related".¹⁵

d. Philosophy of Religion

According to Hegel, religion represents the Absolute whereas philosophy conceives it.¹⁶ In Christianity, since the concept is supreme and ultimate, philosophy surpasses religion to this extent but in doing this it finally and fully justifies Christianity.¹⁷ The doctrine that elevates Christianity above all other religions is the doctrine of incarnation which according to Hegel is the religious expression of the philosophical truth that the infinite Being is not distinct from what is finite but is necessarily manifested in it.¹⁸ Hegel also interpreted Trinity in terms of philosophical categories. In the *Science of Logic* God is revealed as he is before creation of the world; in the *Philosophy of Nature* in his material embodiment; and in the *Philosophy of Mind* as reconciling the finite and the infinite.¹⁹ Hegel interpreted the doctrine that God is love to mean that although the Infinite Being cannot exist without negation and opposition, the negation and opposition are finally reconciled. For him,

‘The goal of philosophy is the cognition of the truth—the cognition of God because God is the absolute truth. Philosophy knows God essentially as concrete, as the spiritual, realized universality that is not jealous but communicates itself.’ The Enlightenment is not pleased when philosophy defends the rationality of the Christian religion or shows that the truth is deposited in religion. The task of philosophy or of ‘the philosophy that is theology’—is ‘to show forth the rational content of religion. ‘Philosophy is to this extent theology’, that it presents the reconciliation of God with the world, this reconciliation being the peace that does not ‘surpass all reason’ but is itself precisely reason. Theology, then, is a branch of philosophy that concerns itself with the knowledge of God and exhibits the rational content of religion. It does this by raising the symbolic, metaphorical, representational language of religion into a conceptual, scientific terminology—and precisely this is the agenda of Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of religion.²⁰

Hegel’s philosophy of religion has been interpreted in many ways that goes counter to orthodox Christianity. Yet, Hegel himself has claimed that Christianity is adequate in its own sphere and that

13 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialectic#cite_note-26#cite_note-26 accessed on 06/07/2010

14 Ibid.

15 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialectic#Hegelian_dialectic accessed on 06/07/2010

16 Michael Inwood, “Hegel”, p.747

17 “Hegel”, *Britannica*, p.303

18 Ibid.

19 Acton, “Hegel”, p.438

20 “Hegel”, *Britannica*, p.303

philosophy of religions is needed only to counteract false religious views and false views about religions.

III. Hegelianism and Biblical Theology

a. David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74)

Strauss was one of the early Hegelians who used Hegel's philosophical concepts in theology. His book *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* was very influential. In his book, Strauss refuses both historical accuracy of miracle accounts in the Gospels as well as the narratives as mere fabrications. Instead he used the idea of "myth", a concept he took from Hegel's philosophy of religion and applied it to supernatural elements. In the Hegelian sense it shows that the early disciples have figured out that God and man are one. As Hegel propounded, man is the union of finite and infinite, of spirit and nature and that man is destined for perfection in the development process.

b. Wilhelm Vatke (1806-1882)

Vatke's *The Religion of the Old Testament Presented According to the Canonical Books* is thorough Hegelian reading of the religion of Old Testament. Vatke places "the fundamental notion of Old Testament religion and its concrete historical appearance on the Hegelian concept of revelation as the slow self-realization of pure Spirit in history gradually coming to conscious expression in the religious thought of the Hebrews".²¹ The basic development of Israelite religion is presented as a gradual movement from nature worship to a religion of spiritual individuality. Using the Hegelian dialectic, Vatke propounded that the nature religion is the thesis, Jewish religion is its antithesis which on synthesis forms Christianity as the true spiritual religion.

c. Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) and Tübingen School

Tübingen school under F C Baur characterized a new era in the NT study and is considered as the most controversial movement in biblical criticism in the mid-nineteenth century. The school activities began with the publication of Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, as a movement toward anti-supernaturalism. Baur also viewed Jesus in Hegelian terms as the "exemplary embodiment of an idea that had greater universal significance than the concrete person of Jesus himself".²² With an anti-supernaturalistic outlook, this school contributed the historical-critical approach of the Bible which completely disregarded the divine aspect.²³

d. Bruno Bauer (1809-82)

Another Hegelian influence can be traced in the writings of Bruno Bauer. In his book, *The Religion of the Old Testament in the Historical Development of its Principles*, Bauer instead of the Hegelian absolute spirit, argues for a human subjective spirit.²⁴ He denied the historicity of the four Gospels on the basis of his Hegelian exposition. For him, there is no historical Jesus; it was only the

21 John H. Hayes and Frederick Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: its history and development*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1934).

22 R.V. Pierard, "Tübingen School", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985), p.1115.

23 Ibid.

24 Hayes and Prussner, OT, p.102

imagined Christ of the early Christian Church.²⁵ Once again Hegelian thought has been used to arrive at a seemingly contradictory position.

e. Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918)

Hegelian influence can be traced in the Wellhausen's famous documentary hypothesis. Wellhausen's division of Israel's religious development and hence its history is attributed to Hegelian influence.²⁶ Martin Hegel (1920) argued that in Wellhausen's history-construction, the influence of Hegel is evident. Also, Wellhausen credits Vatke in his *Prolegomena* as he uses Hegelian dialectic to arrive at the date of P sources.²⁷ Wellhausen observes that in the patriarchy period, sacrifice was of a communal meal aspect which over the course of time evolves as an increasingly legalistic institution.²⁸ Also Wellhausen argues for three distinct stages of religious development related to the three main sources (JDE) of Pentateuch.

f. Protestant Liberalism

Also known as modernism, Liberalism aspires to adapt religious ideas to modern culture and modes of thinking. Liberal argue that Christianity has always adapted its form and language to the particular cultural situations in its development.²⁹ The central idea of liberal teleology as divine immanence – God as indwelling within the world – is derived from the Hegelian absolute idealism that emphasizes the existence of the ultimate spirit as the rational structure within the process of history. Through the dialectical process this reason is overcoming the irrational and evil to attain perfection.³⁰ Thus Hegelianism contributed to the Protestant Liberalism through the idea of divine immanence and a historical criticism of bible.

IV. Conclusion

Hegel's philosophical ideas had profound impact on the succeeding generations. His dialectics, philosophy of history and religion has effected great impact on the reflections of theologians like Strauss, Vatke and others. Hegelianism as a method of doing theology has produced some unexpected results – from the anti-supernaturalism that discredited the infallibility claims of Bible to tracing Israel's history as an evolutionary process. Overriding the Protestant Orthodoxy claims, the Hegelians moved the biblical study and theology onto a different course that has produced multiple reactions in the theological reflections. In the historical-critical method and Liberalism, theology and especially biblical studies have been thoroughly influenced by the Hegelianism.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Diane Banks, *Writing the history of Israel* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p.59

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ D.D. Webster, "Liberalism Theology", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985), p.637

³⁰ Ibid.

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