

## The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

### How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

#### CHAPTER TEN (Cont.)

##### *Dangerous Hegelian Views?*

If there is any charge leveled against the Mercersburg movement that may awaken alarm among heirs of the Puritans today it is that it was corrupted by the thinking of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). Admittedly, patterns of Hegel's thought influenced those Mercersburg theologians under review here. A volume by Shao Kai Tseng is useful in helping discern whether such an association would necessarily prove fatal to the usefulness of Rauch's and Nevin's works for other heirs of Reformation theology whose development paths have not been so influenced and who operate under suspicion of other brands of Reformed theology than that into which they have been inducted.

Hegel actually saw religion as alienating humans from absolute spirit because he believed religion forced absolute spirit to assume a "representational" form." His system implied that one need not take the Bible literally as God's Word or accept the historical reality of Christ's death and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

Among the heirs of Puritan theology, Cornelius Van Til was accused of corrupting Christianity with Hegelian idealism in the 1940's and 1950's when he very critically built upon Hegel. In fact, Van Til demonstrated how a faithful Christian witness can beneficially adapt philosophy from an anti-Biblical school of thought.<sup>2</sup> Among others whom the heirs of the Puritans would admire, both Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) read much Hegel, opposing his overall philosophy but adopting methodology from him. Tseng reiterates what has already been alluded to above, that for some who would claim Calvin and the Puritans are all that is needed and that all modern thinkers such as Hegel should be ignored, they neglect the fact that the Puritans drew

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<sup>1</sup> Shao Kai Tseng, *G. W. F. Hegel*, Great Thinkers, Series Ed. Nathan D. Shannon (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2018), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

from sources which were both Christian and non-Christian, orthodox and heterodox. "Reformed theology in a vacuum is not historic Reformed theology."<sup>3</sup>

René Descartes (1596-1650) is often referred to as the father of modern philosophy. He developed an epistemology on knowing self over against the revelation of God. He believed God the Creator to be good and not deceiving. Since He gave humans sensory perception, then perception should be assumed trustworthy. The God he espoused is the God of reason rather than the God revealed in Scripture. Tseng, in describing such rationalism, spoke of "the presupposition that rational certainty about our thought processes provides the ground whereupon we can make sense of the external world."<sup>4</sup>

During the same time that Hegel was developing his thought, empiricism was developing in England. Tseng provides the following definition for empiricism as a system of thought where "sensory experience is the primary or even the only source of human knowledge."<sup>5</sup> The movement included Francis Bacon, John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. These stood against rational constructs as reliable windows into reality. This led Hume to reject the possibility of a metaphysical knowledge of God.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) tried to integrate rationalism and Hume's empiricism. His system became known as transcendental idealism. The term *transcendental* refers to the idea that experience cannot grant full certainty about the reality of external objects experienced by the senses. All sensory experience is dependent on active categories of the mind. What is real is sensed by representations (how something appears) rather than exactly what it is in itself. Thus, the primary role of humans is that of passive receivers, and God functions as a "regulative principle" by facilitating the interpretation of actual experiences. Tseng summarizes, "Within the bounds of pure reason . . . it is impossible to know anything about the existence of God as an object external to our minds."<sup>6</sup>

Early on Hegel showed signs of being under the influence of Kant, but he was troubled by Kant's assertion that things are unknowable in themselves since all that can be grasped are representations. Further, he rejected the idea that it was impossible to rationally gain knowledge of God.<sup>7</sup> His response in collaboration with Schelling was absolute idealism which Tseng defines as "the mind is everything, and everything is the mind." He felt the cognizant subject must be able to truly identify with the object of cognition, the absolute spirit which takes in all of reality.<sup>8</sup> Hegel's system viewed history as the process of spirit actualizing itself through human consciousness in each stage of history. God as absolute

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17-20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22.

spirit reveals His mind through the historical process of development of collective consciousness in creatures. Thus, a philosophical study of the history of human consciousness can yield access to the ultimate reality of God's mind.<sup>9</sup> At this point, those familiar with Mercersburg will recall familiar themes reflecting to varying degrees vital elements of Hegel's system.

Rather than viewing God as a perfect, unchanging being, fully transcendent to the world, Hegel and Schelling saw the divine as developing through the world of nature, history and the human longing for transcendence.<sup>10</sup> The reason belonging to human consciousness, the rationality of the world, and its history are ultimately one. Tseng explained that the goal of Hegel's methodology is to "uncover the essential rationality of the world that . . . manifests itself through actual history."<sup>11</sup> His thought maintained a significant distinction between concept and representation. Representational thinking focuses on what can be sensed; conceptual thinking searches for a thing's rational essence. The rational is the true and real or the pure essence. "Pure essentiality is knowable to us only as it actualizes itself in concrete historical reality" (Tseng).<sup>12</sup> The goal of the speculative method is to discover the concept behind representations.

Hegel would acknowledge no human alienation from God as a result of some offence against Him. Rather, God and humankind are actually identical as one spirit, and somehow spirit alienates itself from itself in order to reconcile itself to itself.<sup>13</sup> The philosopher actually participates with the world spirit in progressing toward the next phase of historical development.

Hegel missed the crucial truth which Owen brought forth that because of indwelling sin the human mind is darkness, and the heart is dead and not able to have consciousness. On what authority did he accept his philosophy as true? Is he not confident in himself as that authority, and on what grounds can he assume veracity? He assumes much about the accuracy of his own understanding, will, conscience, sense of beauty, imagination and affections. He is the man Mead described who is blinded by philosophy and so sees himself to be beautiful and cannot detect sin's deformity.

Within this heading of spirit reconciliation falls the thesis, antithesis, synthesis formula, even though these terms were never used by Hegel to describe the process he envisioned. The language he employed was that of "the negation of a negation."<sup>14</sup> Discernible within this strand of thought is a reflection from his Protestant training, specifically Luther's theology of the cross, where God's glory is made visible through Christ's humiliation and ultimately through the crucifixion.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 43.

Seeking glory apart from the humiliation of the cross is error. Humanity's sin met God's wrath at the cross and death was sentenced to die. The double negation idea appealed to Hegel. As Tseng again helpfully summarizes, "Christ did not embrace the cross just in order to die, but rather to die in order to bring forth the glory of the resurrection."<sup>15</sup>

Hegel saw the bringing together of opposing voices in the dialectic model of debate, as a more sure way to discover truth than by means of using the traditional laws of logic, because he believed truth was more complex than to submit to such means of discovery. Since truth refers to the whole of a developmental process and not a list of propositions that can either be labeled true or false, contradictions can be tolerated. In fact, they are useful to the process itself of the evolution of truth. Yet he held to the idea of absolute truth as opposed to relative. By that he had in mind the final end result of the process belonging to truth's development or how it is manifested in the present dialectical development. Thus, truth is a living subject. Life is a process and ultimate truth as a living subject is manifested in the process of life.<sup>16</sup> "The process of mediation that spirit [the term Hegel uses for the sum of all reality] undergoes constitutes the whole of reality, and the truth is the whole of this process" (Tseng).<sup>17</sup>

Another outgrowth of Hegel's thought was organicism which is treating reality and truths concerning reality as an organic, living whole.<sup>18</sup> Organic philosophy rejects static categories of existence held by substantialist philosophers which can be summed up as "becoming is determined by being." Instead, it holds forth the idea that "what a thing is at present is determined by what it has in it to become: being is determined by becoming" (Tseng).<sup>19</sup> Substantialist philosophy, according to Hegel, falls short because it fails to grasp the larger picture which sees nature and substance as a process that is alive.

Hegel believed that the purpose of true religion is philosophy, and that religion would eventually be assimilated into philosophy once it had served its purpose. He saw the incarnation as beneficial in that it granted consciousness of a divine-human unity sensibly represented in Jesus. Gaining this consciousness is the absolute object, though, not God. The goal is to grasp spirit. It should be noted that later in life Hegel ceased claiming a negative role for religion as if it would be assimilated into philosophy. Instead, philosophy would transform rather than replace the church.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 45-48.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 61-63.

Many schools of thought developed from Hegel's complex ideas – some orthodox who borrowed from him and others very far from orthodox. He himself was obviously outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Tseng's work surveyed points where Reformed thought has borrowed from Hegel. He does not include any Mercersburg figures in his analysis. He portrays Hegel's system as a shipwreck, and godly people have been able to salvage treasures from it. Bavinck and Van Til agreed with Hegel that no system of philosophy is completely devoid of truth.<sup>21</sup> Hegel's *spirit* is nowhere near synonymous with the God of the Bible.<sup>22</sup>

Like Nevin and his Mercersburg colleague Philip Schaff, Bavinck adapted the idea of organicism from Hegel.<sup>23</sup> Later Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), regarded as the father of Reformed Biblical theology, would likewise adapt organicism for use in Reformed theology.<sup>24</sup> All orthodox thinkers insisted in a Trinitarian God who is distinct from the universe and on absolute, propositional truth rooted in God's nature, rejecting Hegel's idea of spirit and the concept of truth as a life that is evolving. Revelation unfolds progressively, but the truth of God's being is not progressive as with Hegel). Mercersburg likewise rejected Hegel's unbiblical errors while salvaging valuable treasures from the shipwreck. Similar to Vos, Mercersburg would promote the idea of the believer's organic mystical union with Christ. They would make much of the development of history but would not reject written revelation as Hegel did nor regard history as divine as with Hegel.

Tseng concluded that because Van Til and Bavinck held to God's transcendence, that He is uncreated and distinct from creation, they could safely borrow formal aspects of Hegel's thought without crossing over to adopt the content of his system.<sup>25</sup> The same statement could be asserted regarding Rauch and Nevin.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>23</sup> For those interested, Tseng spends numerous pages detailing how Bavinck refuted the errors in Hegel beginning on page 72.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>26</sup> For insight into how another European philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, influenced the mediating theology of Mercersburg, see *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology* by Annette G. Aubert. She examines specifically the theology of Emmanuel Vogel Gerhart (1817-1904), a successor to Nevin. Her work explains his response to Common Sense Realism and traces the influences that surfaced in Mercersburg back to German thought but noting that Mercersburg only critically adopted what developed in Europe. Schleiermacher relegated to Scripture secondary importance and elevated the person and work of Christ as the central principle from which all topics of theology could be deduced since all are organically related. He saw the incarnation, being the union of the divine and human, as more central than the atonement and the essence of Christianity as being union with God. These themes show up in modified form in Mercersburg, but not solely in Mercersburg. German Mediating Theology was influencing North America widely at the time, including Princeton Seminary. Aubert points out that Princeton focused on truth as agreement between statement and objective fact, thus reducing truth to an idea; Gerhart located truth in the living Christ, thus seeing Christianity as a life rather than doctrine (p. 100). He did not follow Schleiermacher who had abandoned Anselm's atonement theory of satisfaction but instead retained doctrines pertaining to the guilt of sin and God's just wrath (p. 127). Since the

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atonement rested on who Christ is, Gerhart lifted up the significance of the incarnation more than his Presbyterian counterparts. He held that there were two aspects of the atonement – one forensic and the other vivific wherein a believer is redeemed by partaking of Christ's person and not only His work on the cross.