

# Introduction

## *Hegel's Trinitarian Claim*

G. W. F. Hegel is one of the greatest thinkers of the Greek-Western trinitarian tradition. He said that the theologians of his day had effectively abandoned the doctrine of the Trinity so that it was up to him as a philosopher to recoup the trinitarian tradition.<sup>1</sup> Though Hegel left to posterity a brilliant, philosophically informed trinitarian argument, it is not philosophers so much as theologians who have profited from his efforts. By way of example, Hegel's radical restructuring of the general trinitarian dogma into the dialectical movement of a triadically structured divine self-development finds a striking structural parallel in the positions of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, perhaps the two most significant Western trinitarian thinkers in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Consistent with their respective Christian traditions, Barth<sup>2</sup> understood the trinitarian God as a movement of self-revelation and Rahner<sup>3</sup> as a movement of self-communication. Both have, each in his own way, elaborated parallels to Hegel's trinitarian divine self-development from infinite to finite. What is for Hegel more radically a trinitarian divine self-othering becomes for Barth a trinitarian self-revelation and for Rahner a trinitarian self-communication.

Hegel's trinitarian envisionment can be intimated by quoting briefly from what Hegel wrote in the manuscript for his 1821 philosophy of religion lectures on the absolute religion:

God is *Spirit*—that is, that which we call the *triune God*; . . .  
God is Spirit, *absolute activity, actus purus*, i.e., *subjectivity, infinite personality*, infinite distinction of oneself from oneself,

generation. However, this process of distinguishing is contained *within the eternal Concept*, . . . i.e., [within] *universality as absolute subjectivity*.<sup>4</sup>

This reference to God as triune is primarily and immediately concerned with what would today, when properly nuanced in view of Hegel's complex treatment, be referred to as "immanent" Trinity. Nevertheless, the very use of the term "Spirit" (*Geist*), which is ultimately for Hegel the totality of his philosophical system inclusive of its self-determining development, clearly implies as well what would today, again when properly nuanced, be referred to as "economic" Trinity. As an 1824 philosophy of religion lecture transcript records in the context of a discussion on the suffering and death of the Mediator, "God is the true God, Spirit, because God is not merely Father, enclosed within Self, but rather because God is Son, becomes the other and sublates this other."<sup>5</sup> For Hegel this reference to Trinity is not, however, a mere description of the divine but a claim to be argued in the public realm. For Hegel, God can be Subject, Person and Spirit only to the extent that the divine is trinitarian in structure, to the extent that a movement of self-othering and return is verified in God and, here very generally stated, in God as inclusive of the world. In his philosophy of history lectures Hegel claims, "God is only then recognized as Spirit to the extent that God is known as triune."<sup>6</sup> And using the term "personhood" (*Persönlichkeit*) as particularly appropriate to his *Outline of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel wrote in the margin, "One may define believing in God how one will, but if personality is not there, the definition is inadequate."<sup>7</sup> Finally, as representative of Hegel's clear trinitarian claim in the various philosophy of religion lectures:

God is however to be grasped only as Spirit, and this is no empty word, no superficial determination. But if God is not to be for us an empty word, then God must be grasped as triune God; this is that through which the nature of Spirit is made explicit . . . Only the Trinity is the determination of God as Spirit; without this determination Spirit is an empty word.<sup>8</sup>

There is a particular earnest with which Hegel makes his claim that only if God is known as what would today be termed "immanent" and

“economic” Trinity can God be known as Spirit, that is, that there can be established in God inclusive subjectivity becoming absolute Spirit finally as philosophical Concept. This earnest is indicated both by the consequences Hegel draws from the successful or unsuccessful establishment of that trinitarian structure and by his consistently maintained systematic position on the identity of content but difference of form between religion and philosophy. In trinitarian divine self-othering and sublation of that otherness Hegel sees the principle or axis upon which world history turns.<sup>9</sup> World history is for Hegel a history of God.<sup>10</sup> This trinitarian dialectic is equally for Hegel the principle of freedom,<sup>11</sup> the source of community,<sup>12</sup> the reason why God can be known<sup>13</sup> and the justifying content of Christianity’s distinctive truth claims<sup>14</sup> as the religion of absolute subjectivity<sup>15</sup> and freedom.<sup>16</sup> Trinity, the content of the true religion, is for Hegel divine self-revelation.<sup>17</sup> According to Hegel, without a trinitarian structure to the divine there would be no true reconciliation in Christ.<sup>18</sup> God would be an empty name, one-sided and finite rather than inclusive and infinite.<sup>19</sup> There could be no truth as mediation for there would be no possibility of a transition from religion with its true content but representational form to philosophy where form and content would be identical as absolute Spirit in the philosophical Concept as Self.

For Hegel religion and philosophy have the same true content but differ in form.<sup>20</sup> Whereas in religion alienation overcome by reconciliation is realized representationally in the trinitarian God, in philosophical thought that same content was to have been expressed in its necessity, that is, to have received its adequate form as a mediation which was to have been the identity of thought and Spirit, Concept and Self.<sup>21</sup> In his system, logic and philosophy become for Hegel respectively the appropriate logical and philosophical reformulations of this true content which has been expressed religiously as Trinity, God as reconciliation or absolute subjectivity. In this sense, Hegel’s famous claim in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance* but equally as *Subject*,”<sup>22</sup> becomes an appropriate philosophical reformulation of his trinitarian claim. So too Hegel’s insistence that truth can only be mediated by a content which is itself. “The only content which can be held to be the truth is one not mediated with something else, not limited by other things: or, otherwise expressed, it is one mediated by itself.”<sup>23</sup> Or again, a logical reformulation in the *Logic* where Hegel describes the true infinite as

the mediation of infinite and finite, thus as inclusive totality.<sup>24</sup> Hegel's logic and philosophy, his system as a whole, are the example of that self-mediation<sup>25</sup> which is expressed for Hegel on the level of religion as trinitarian divine reconciliation—absolute subjectivity. Hegel's system as a whole is the fullest philosophical expression of his trinitarian claim. As Hegel was recorded to have said in more explicitly religious language with reference first of all, but surely finally not only to, “immanent” Trinity, “God eternally begets God's Son, . . . But at the same time we ought to know that God Self is this entire activity. God is, the beginning, God acts thus; but God is likewise the end, the totality, and it is as totality that God is Spirit.”<sup>26</sup>

Systematically speaking, that is, from the point of view of his system and especially in its speculative formulation, Hegel argues this trinitarian claim as a movement from infinite to finite to inclusive or affirmative infinite with infinite understood as inclusive totality. This self-positing movement from infinite to finite is witnessed to by his systematic beginning ever with the immediacy of an originary unity positing itself as otherness which is in turn sublated in a return to enriched immediacy. In the *Logic* and *Encyclopedia* this originary unity is pure being,<sup>27</sup> in the *Phenomenology* sense certainty,<sup>28</sup> in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* as a whole the Concept of religion<sup>29</sup> and in the lectures specifically on the absolute religion “immanent” Trinity as religiously represented.<sup>30</sup>

Though there is no end to the literature on Hegel,<sup>31</sup> and sufficient research would probably show that most everything possible has already been said about him in one way or other, apparently only two monographs have been published so far specifically on his trinitarian thought. Neither of them has directly challenged the particular direction or way in which Hegel tries to establish his trinitarian claim. Johannes Hessen's 1922 volume, *Hegels Trinitätslehre. Zugleich eine Einführung in Hegels System*,<sup>32</sup> is far too brief (45 pages) to provide an adequate summary and critique of Hegel's trinitarian thought. In *Die Trinitätslehre G. W. F. Hegels*,<sup>33</sup> Jörg Splett intended to fulfill Hessen's original proposal.<sup>34</sup> Splett gives a considerably more thorough and helpful overview of Hegel's widely scattered writing on Trinity. By gathering many of Hegel's texts and students' lecture transcripts on Trinity, Splett has verified the central import of this topic for any serious study of Hegel's thought. Splett closes with several points of discussion and critique.

The present study has as its purpose a critical reflection on Hegel's trinitarian claim. Its basic thesis is that Hegel cannot establish his trinitarian claim as he intended to, namely, on the basis of an argumentation in the public realm from infinite to finite. Hegel's argument always presupposes a prior movement from finite to infinite. In Part One of this study, Chapter One presents the *Logic* as an appropriate text to be examined, and Chapter Two critiques the movement of logic or pure thought in its primordial, elementary instantiation, being/nothing/becoming. In Part Two, Chapter Three provides an overview of the syllogistic structure of Hegel's explicit trinitarian thought on the basis of the *Encyclopedia* and works out a criterion for evaluating Hegel's argument in the *Phenomenology*. Chapter Four contains a critique of Hegel's trinitarian argument in its incarnational immediacy as presented in the *Phenomenology*. Chapter Five forms a critical reflection on Hegel's trinitarian thought in its final communitarian and syllogistic structure.

Strictly speaking, the immanent critique presented in the context of this overall critical reflection applies directly only to Hegel's thought. However, it should be noted that Hegel is one of the most significant representatives of those who have developed a trinitarian position from infinite to finite. To the extent that others, whose trinitarian thought parallels or is dependent on Hegel's, may not themselves have been able to resolve the contradictions or ones similar to those which will have become apparent in Hegel's position, they too would be susceptible to this critique.

Finally, it is most important to distinguish between Hegel's general conception of a triadically structured inclusive infinite and the specific way in which he argued his claim to its necessity. The present critique is aimed primarily at the way in which Hegel argues his claim, namely, as self-determining movement of conceptual thought from infinite to finite. When freed of certain limitations, his general envisionment of the divine as a triadically structured inclusive infinite, God inclusive of world, remains unchallenged. Rather, when seen in proper correlation with Hegel's understanding of self-contradictory finitude, this trinitarian envisionment will be employed in Part Three, Chapter Six, of this study to build on the Conclusions especially to Chapters Two, Four and Five in an attempt at a first sketching of an alternative trinitarian argument from finitude to triadic inclusive infinite.