

HEGEL ON THE INCARNATION: UNIQUE OR UNIVERSAL?

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HEGEL'S IMPORTANCE for modern theology is widely recognized. Thirty years ago, Walter Kaufmann wrote that "no philosopher since 1800 has had more influence. A study of Hegel enriches our comprehension of subsequent philosophy and theology. . . . Indeed, recent intellectual history cannot be understood apart from him."¹ So extensive has Hegel's influence been that one even finds it at the Second Vatican Council.²

In addition to forming a significant part of the background to contemporary theology, his thought also confronts us with specific problems that are still of current interest. For example, the 1992 annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America included a forum on the question of whether the figure of Jesus gives us the definitive access to God, or whether other saviors and revealers may also be admitted by Christian theology.³ The same question emerges from Hegel's treatment of the Incarnation. According to him, the fundamental appearance of God occurs in rational thinking per se. It then becomes difficult to maintain the unique incarnation acknowledged by Christian tradition. But since this incarnation assures (for Christianity) the role of Jesus as the definitive savior and revealer of God,⁴ Hegel's interpretation leads to problems like the one discussed at the 1992 CTSA meeting. There is no doubt that Hegel's work raises fundamental questions about the unique position of Jesus Christ in human history. It also seems to make philosophy superior to theology and religious knowledge.

On the other hand, Hegel can also be interpreted as a defender of the Christian religion. In both his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Lec-*

¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts, and Commentary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965) 9.

² Consider the following entry from Gerald O'Collins, S.J., and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1991) s.v. "Self-Communication": "Term used by German idealists like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and then adopted by theologians like Karl Rahner (1904–84) and the Second Vatican Council (DV 6) to designate the self-manifestation and self-giving of God in the process of revelation and grace."

³ See "Forum: Is Jesus Christ the Unique Mediator of Salvation?" in *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention of the CTSA* 136–37.

⁴ "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)," *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America, 1966) no. 4: "Jesus Christ . . . the Word made flesh . . . completes the work of salvation. . . . Jesus perfected revelation. . . ."

tures on the *Philosophy of Religion*, Christianity closes the series of world religions because it completes their development. And in the *Phenomenology* Hegel maintains that his own "speculative knowing is the knowing of the manifest⁵ [or Christian] religion,"⁶ which offers "the true absolute content."⁷ With such affirmations Hegel confirms the Christian belief that God appeared in Christ. Nevertheless Hegel's agreement with this belief is problematic, since he also seems to deviate from the common Christian tradition which accords to Jesus a divine status given to no other human being.

Hegel's theory of God encourages this deviation. A brief summary of this theory will provide a frame of reference for the following discussion, and may also help readers unfamiliar with Hegelian thought and terminology.

For Hegel God is not a transcendent creator but the substance or essence of the universe. Moreover, this divine essence is thoroughly rational; it is universal reason or thought as the underlying objectivity ("in itself") of all that exists. As an objective rational essence this universal reason develops itself by logical implication into the material universe ("nature") and then into human subjectivity ("spirit"). Since human subjectivity is not simply individual personality but also the intellectual thinking of universal thoughts, human individuality ("for itself") is also the appearance of universal divine essence. Spirit then is not simply subjective human thinking and behavior "for itself," but also the objective result of divine substance's own self-determination "in itself." Thus human personality becomes a divine predicate, and even the highest such predicate; for it completes divine self-manifestation. Aware of its role as the vehicle of absolute essence, human thinking is "absolute spirit." Religion expresses this truth imaginatively (by *Vorstellung*, which means both "image" and "imagination"), while Hegel's philosophy ("absolute knowing") comprehends the same truth by concepts, or *Begriffe*. Philosophy thus outranks theology because God is universal *reason*.

In Hegel's theory God appears as human thinking; even Jesus incarnates God's presence in this way. The incarnation thus becomes a rational truth instead of a supernatural mystery. But since rational truths are universal in scope, applying to all instances of the phenomena they describe, divine incarnation should occur wherever human thinking occurs. Hegel's position would then imply a universal incarnation rather than a unique one restricted to Jesus alone. His position would also challenge the very existence of Christian theology, which

⁵ In Christianity, divine essence is "revealed" or made "manifest." See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes, Gesammelte Werke* (in Verbindung mit der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft [und] herausgegeben von der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), vol. 9, ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1980); hereafter *Phänomenologie*, with references to page numbers and lines; the translations are mine.

⁶ *Phänomenologie* 407.3-4.

⁷ *Ibid.* 419.32.

acknowledges a revelation centered on a unique mediator between God and humanity.

But can this really be Hegel's meaning? The density of his thought makes it difficult to obtain a clear understanding of his position. Nevertheless the following pages attempt it, by exploring in four sections Hegel's treatment of the incarnation. An initial section introduces the problem of how to understand him by examining David Friedrich Strauss's interpretation. Then comes an exegetical section on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1806-1807; in particular, its treatment of Christianity as "The Manifest Religion" in chapter 7.⁸ Another exegetical section then considers the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* given in Berlin between 1821 and 1831. Since these lectures belong to a later period, one has to look for possible changes in Hegel's thinking about the incarnation since the earlier *Phenomenology*. A concluding section synthesizes the results of the two exegetical sections.

THE PROBLEM

For Hegel the fundamental content of Christianity is the incarnation of God in Jesus: "this becoming human of divine essence . . . is the simple content of the absolute [or Christian] religion."⁹ But in what sense does Hegel understand this incarnation? Theories like the hypostatic union or the moral unity of divine and human wills find no place in his thinking. For Hegel the incarnation instead expresses a metaphysical truth: divine essence or substance develops itself into human being. Thus "divine nature is the same [thing] as human [nature], and this unity is what is viewed"¹⁰ in Jesus. This formulation in turn suggests that the incarnation is universal rather than unique: that it pertains to all of humanity rather than to Jesus alone. For if deity appears in human nature rather than in a single person, it would have to correspond to every instance of rational human being.

This implication finds expression in Hegel's disciple David Friedrich Strauss, whose interpretation of Hegel is well known. Strauss took Hegel to mean that God's incarnation was not limited to the single person of Jesus but included all human being.¹¹ That interpretation

⁸ I omit much of Hegel's analysis in order to focus on a single feature of it, namely the principle of universal incarnation. A more detailed discussion of "The Manifest Religion" as a whole may be found in my recent book, *The Human Shape of God: Religion in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

⁹ *Phänomenologie* 405.14-16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 406.8-10.

¹¹ David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1835-1836) 2.732-38, from §147, "Letztes Dilemma." The previous section (§146: "Die speculative Christologie") cites Hegel, Marheineke, and Rosenkranz for its very orthodox Christology. In §147 however Strauss claims that Christology finds its real meaning in the whole human species of world history rather than in a single individual. He mentions Hegel only once (737) in §147; the section seems to be a development of Hegel's thought rather than a strict explication of it. Peter C. Hodgson provides

was controversial in its time¹² and even today scholars are divided about its merits.¹³ Current disagreement over Hegel's meaning indicates that the old controversies remain unresolved, because Hegel's own position still needs explication.

By attempting such an explication, the following pages will show that Strauss's interpretation has good grounds—that in fact it makes better sense of Hegel's texts than the Christian interpretation which finds Hegel in agreement with traditional church doctrine. By defending Strauss's interpretation of Hegel I do not of course mean to defend it as a valid interpretation of Christianity. My goal is rather to show

concise information about Strauss's uncertainty over the incarnation; see his "Hegel's Christology: Shifting Nuances in the Berlin Lectures," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985) 23–40, at 23 nn. 2–3.

¹² It belonged to the battle between left- and right-wing Hegelians; for this typology see the helpful bibliographic essay by Peter C. Hodgson at the end of his "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," in *Nineteenth-Century Religious Thought in the West*, 3 vols., ed. Ninian Smart et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985), 1.118–21.

¹³ For some Strauss represents an un-Christian deviation from Hegel's thought. Thus Hans Frei finds that "Strauss consciously departed from the Hegelian school and from Hegel's own explicit position. . . . Saying that he could not get decisive answers from Hegel, he made up the Master's mind for him posthumously" ("David Friedrich Strauss," in *Nineteenth-Century Religious Thought in the West* 1.215–60, at 230–31). Anselm Min, convinced of Hegel's agreement with Christian faith on the uniqueness of Jesus, rejects the Straussian position and provides a Hegelian reason for the Christian doctrine ("The Trinity and the Incarnation: Hegel and Classical Approaches," *Journal of Religion* 66 [1986] 173–93, at 178, 190, 191–92). Peter C. Hodgson likewise finds no discrepancy between Hegel and the Christian understanding of Jesus as the unique incarnation of God; see, e.g., "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel" 30–31 n.11; see also his "Alienation and Reconciliation in Hegelian and Post-Hegelian Perspective," *Modern Theology* 2 (1985) 42–63, esp. 51–52. In the latter article Hodgson criticizes F. C. Baur for adopting a universalist position (56) similar to Strauss's. And in other works that do not explore the specific question of a unique incarnation, one encounters not infrequently the view that Hegel follows Christian tradition. Emilio Brito writes that "the Hegelian doctrine of the incarnation appears to conform to the dogma of Chalcedon" (*Hegel et la tâche actuelle de la christologie*, trans. Thierry Dejong, S.J. [Paris: Éditions Lethielleux, 1979] 134). And Albert Chapelle considers Hegel a Christian theologian who believes in "the free incarnation of the Logos in the flesh" ("L'absolu et l'histoire: pensée hégélienne et théologie catholique," in *Hegel et la théologie contemporaine: L'absolu dans l'histoire?* [Neuchâtel & Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1977] 205–18, at 206). Such works and authors could easily be multiplied. Others, however, echo Strauss's interpretation. For James Yerkes, "Hegel's christology presupposes a doctrine of the Incarnation which is universally ontological in character" (*The Christology of Hegel*, American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series 23, ed. H. Ganse Little, Jr. [Missoula; Scholars, 1978] 171; or see the reprint edition [with different pagination] in The SUNY Series in Hegelian Studies, ed. Quentin Lauer, S.J. [Albany: State University, 1983] 120). Likewise Karl Löwith: "Hegel conceives the dogma of God's revelation in a human being . . . according to a universal principle, so that . . . there is . . . no personal and unique character to God's incarnation" ("Hegels Aufhebung der christlichen Religion," in *Einsichten: Gerhard Krüger zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Klaus Oehler & Richard Schaeffler [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1962] 156–203, at 186). The same idea can be found in other authors too: e.g. Joseph Fitzer, "Hegel and the Incarnation: A Response to Hans Küng," *Journal of Religion* 52 (1972) 240–67, at 263–65; Peter Koslowski, "Hegel—der Philosoph der Trinität? Zur Kontroverse um seine Trinitätslehre," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 162 (1982) 105–31, at 129.

how sharply Hegel's thought diverges from traditional Christology. Strauss only serves my purpose to the extent that he emphasizes the universalist direction of Hegel's theory.

Strauss in fact may not have interpreted Hegel accurately enough. His interpretation often appeals to the universality of God as an eternal idea; and this theme certainly is fundamental to Hegel's thought. Strauss however is not very precise about the meaning of divine universality as it expresses itself in human being. He seems to prefer a collective interpretation of universal humanity, according to which all human beings taken together correspond to God's universality. But this is not Hegel's own meaning. In his description of spirit in the Christian Church, Hegel distinguishes two stages of universal thinking: the preliminary one of imagination, and the final one of true conceptual thought. The Christian view of spirit uses imagination, and so it is "not yet the form of *thinking* itself, of *the concept as concept*, but [is only] the universality of actuality, the allness of selves, and the lifting of existence (*Erhebung des Daseins*) into imagination (*Vorstellung*)."¹⁴ This "allness of selves" corresponds to the collective universality found in Strauss; but for Hegel it is an image abstracted from actual existence rather than a concept which comprehends it.¹⁵ The Hegelian concept must then be different: namely, a definition which applies universally to each single instance illustrating it. The universal meaning of the incarnation would then refer to every instance of rational human being. This meaning is a much better interpretation of Hegel than the one offered by Strauss. It gives "universality" an individual rather than a collective meaning. And this meaning (of a repeatedly individual incarnation) also appears in other parts of the *Phenomenology*.

THE INCARNATION IN HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

How does the *Phenomenology* support the interpretation of a universal divine incarnation? Five topics will be investigated: "the appearing God" of conscience, the meaning of spirit, revelation or manifestation, the Christian Church, and the relation of religion to philosophy. Because Hegel is especially obscure in the *Phenomenology*, none of these topics is easy to describe.

Conscience

In the *Phenomenology* divine incarnation develops out of conscience, the moral thinking of German idealism.¹⁶ Hegel refers to "the appearing God" at the very end of his analysis of conscience, when "evil"

¹⁴ *Phänomenologie* 407.27–30.

¹⁵ Hegel's contrast of image and concept also explains why Strauss emphasizes universal humanity's progress more than its logical foundation in Hegel's concept of God: for Strauss images of actuality are more important than their conceptual basis.

¹⁶ Cf. Daniel P. Jamros, "The Appearing God in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," *CLIO* 19 (1990) 353–65.

individual thinking is pardoned; pardon occurs because this evil consciousness knows its resemblance to another consciousness, and so proves itself to be a universal thinking which grasps the essence common to different individuals; it is a "pure knowing"¹⁷ of essence, and is therefore universal or "good." This is the reason for its pardon. And because it is at the same time both universal and individual thinking, human subjectivity is acknowledged as the individual appearance of universal (divine) essence, and so is called "the appearing God."¹⁸ This principle then serves as the basis for Chapter 7, entitled "Religion," which studies the development of divine appearance in various world religions. Christianity concludes this development by recognizing Jesus as the real incarnation of God.

But if the universal God appears as human subjectivity (which thinks universally), why limit God's incarnation to the single figure of Jesus? Since every human being thinks the universal, and is thereby an instance of universal thinking, every human being contains the appearance of universal essence, at least in principle. Or so it would seem from the movement of consciousness up to this point in the *Phenomenology*. As explained by Hegel, the incarnational principle seems to apply to anyone who thinks and acts universally.

One could of course object that Hegel develops the principle in such a way that only Jesus becomes the full incarnation of God. We could then ignore the argument from conscience, which deals only with the basis for incarnational religion but not with its actual realization. But the remaining four topics from the *Phenomenology* indicate the contrary. They all come from Hegel's treatment of divine incarnation in Christ, and they show that he does in fact describe such a universally "appearing God."

Spirit

In *Phenomenology* 7, "spirit" has an incarnational meaning that indicates God's human appearance. Although it is convenient for us to refer to "the incarnation," Hegel himself uses the term sparingly in the *Phenomenology*. He makes only two references to the "incarnation"¹⁹ of God in Jesus, and two more to Jesus as a "divine human";²⁰ one such reference calls him "the *individual* divine human"²¹ in contrast to the Christian Church as "the universal divine human."²² But this dearth of explicit terminology causes no problems, because *Phenomenology* 7 essentially deals with divine-human unity as its main theme. In that chapter "spirit" has an incarnational meaning: "spirit . . . [is divine] essence that essentially is [human] *self-consciousness*";²³ "spirit [is] . . . *essence* . . . that *essentially* assumes human shape."²⁴ Thus the

¹⁷ *Phänomenologie* 362.28–29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 405.14, 418.24.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 417.9, 421.3.

²¹ *Ibid.* 421.2–3.

²² *Ibid.* 421.4.

²³ *Ibid.* 405.25.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 387.27.

incarnation in Jesus is the revelation of "spirit"²⁵—"God . . . as an actual individual human [being]."²⁶ Terms like "spirit" and its two components of "universal essence" and "individual existence" have in view the same conjunction of divine and human that we find in a traditional term like "incarnation."

Given this incarnational meaning, does the term "spirit" have a unique or a universal application? Understanding it as unique brings an immediate difficulty. If "spirit" refers here to Jesus alone as the unique incarnation of God, then the term has acquired a more limited application than it has hitherto had. In Chapter 6 (entitled "Spirit," *Der Geist*"), it refers to human subjectivity in general. If however in Chapter 7 "spirit" refers only to the single incarnation of God in Jesus, it restricts the meaning hitherto developed and thus disrupts the book's continuity. But if incarnational spirit refers potentially to any human being, the book's coherence is preserved. Of course the particular case in view in "The Manifest Religion" (the concluding section of Chapter 7) is the incarnation of God in Jesus, but we obtain a more coherent sense of spirit if Jesus illustrates the general phenomenology of spirit, whose developing meaning applies to all human beings in principle.

Against this position is the possibility that Hegel means to distinguish between spirit in general and the "absolute spirit"²⁷ whose presence in Jesus makes him different from other humans. But since Hegel also used the phrase "absolute spirit"²⁸ for "the appearing God" in his analysis of conscience (which referred to German idealism), the possibility of its referring to Jesus alone in "Manifest Religion" is very questionable. In his text the phrase "absolute spirit" must refer to universal human being, as the example of conscience indicates. Furthermore, "the appearing God" of conscience emerges "among those who know themselves as pure [universal] knowing"²⁹ rather than as unique individuals; "absolute spirit" therefore pertains to more than one person. It can include any self which attains the universal capability of rational thinking.

Hegel's further description of the incarnation of God in Jesus confirms this conclusion. He emphasizes that this incarnation is truly grounded in God (here identified with universal being or substance), inasmuch as "being in general or [divine] substance . . . *in itself* . . . renounced itself and became [human] self-consciousness"³⁰ through "the necessity of the concept."³¹ As the rational substance of universal being, Hegel's God becomes human in a comprehensible or necessary³² way; in the *Phenomenology* this process appears as a development of

²⁵ Ibid. 404.35.

²⁶ Ibid. 405.12–13.

²⁷ Ibid. 404.33.

²⁸ Ibid. 361.25.

²⁹ Ibid. 362.28–29.

³⁰ Ibid. 403.39–404.2.

³¹ Ibid. 404.19.

³² This implies a universal incarnation, for what is necessary is also universal. The concept possesses both "necessity" (ibid. 404.19) and "universality" (ibid. 407.27).

consciousness's object, initially known as empirical being,³³ the "pure being"³⁴ of sensory certainty. Through phenomenological analysis this pure being soon reveals itself as universal³⁵ "*being in general*,"³⁶ and as universal it is later treated as divine essence. This is the universal "being in general or [divine] substance . . . [that] became [human] self-consciousness"³⁷ for Christian faith. Its new object of consciousness is then divine essence in human form, or spirit. Since the divine object of consciousness has developed itself into human being, the incarnation is an objective reality.

On the other hand, consciousness must also become aware of this object. Its actual appearance for consciousness thus requires a subjective discovery: human thinking must come to know itself as universal divine essence. Christian belief in God's incarnation "means nothing other than [this], that actual world-spirit has reached this knowing of itself."³⁸ For Hegel the "world-spirit" knows itself to be divine. Historically of course Jesus is the focal point of this knowledge, and even for Hegel the world-spirit first knows its divinity in the single person of Jesus. Nevertheless Hegel's terminology implies the divinity of the whole; for unless the entire "world-spirit" were God incarnate, it could not know itself in the single figure of Jesus. Hegel's explanation thus implies much more than a divine incarnation restricted to Jesus.

But what exactly does it imply? The phrase "world-spirit" may suggest the collective universal associated with Strauss's interpretation. But a collective consciousness does not exist; what does exist is a number of individual subjectivities which think universally. Such universal thinking always occurs as individual subjectivity or personality. Thus the "world-spirit" knows itself in God incarnate when thoughtful individuals recognize themselves in the individual person of Jesus: because he resembles every universal-minded thinker, the "world-spirit" is able to know itself in him. Hegel's use of "world-spirit"³⁹ refers not to a vague type of collective consciousness but to "the *faith of the world*,"⁴⁰ which is the faith of many individuals.

And since the world-spirit knows itself (in Christian faith) as divine, the incarnation will soon expand from the single person of Jesus to a "universal divine human."⁴¹ But before we turn to that "universal divine human," we can gain more insight into Hegel's position by exploring the way spirit reveals itself⁴² through the single incarnation in Jesus. This revelation implies a universal incarnation rather than a unique one.

³³ Ibid. 63.4–6.

³⁶ Ibid. 64.16–17.

³⁹ Ibid. 404.30.

⁴² Ibid. 405.14–406.10.

³⁴ Ibid. 63.29.

³⁷ Ibid. 403.39–404.2.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 404.34–35.

³⁵ Ibid. 65.14–15.

³⁸ Ibid. 404.29–30.

⁴¹ Ibid. 421.4.

Revelation or Manifestation

Since for Hegel spirit is "[divine] essence that essentially is [human] self-consciousness"⁴³ or essence "that essentially assumes human shape,"⁴⁴ one must speak of it as both divine and human; Hegel's God is the world-essence that eventually becomes human being. Through human thinking this essence comes to know itself.⁴⁵ Thus one could speak of deity revealing itself to itself. The revelation to humans is the same occurrence from the human point of view: God is known to humans as human, as "one like us." Since essence's development terminates in human thinking, essence is *knowable* as human being. Whereas Christianity believes in an infinite mystery that remains mysterious despite its revelation, Hegel's God is the world-essence revealing itself as human thinking. True religion must therefore reveal God as human.

Christianity is "the manifest religion" (*Phenomenology* 7, C) for that very reason. Hegel writes:

Consequently in this religion divine essence has been *manifested* [*geoffenbart*]. Its being manifest [*Offenbarseyn*] manifestly consists in this, that what it is is known. It is however known just insofar as it is known as spirit, as essence that essentially is [human] self-consciousness.⁴⁶

God is knowable because the self is knowable, and God has been revealed as a human self.⁴⁷ For traditional Christology God is revealed in a human being but the two natures remain different, so that God remains a mystery; belief that God was in Christ yields little knowledge of God's essence. For Hegel however the difference between the two natures has been surmounted.⁴⁸ God's essence is essentially human. Therefore the humanity of Jesus adequately reveals divine essence—not because God is uniquely present in Jesus but because God appears in all human being.

This interpretation becomes even more plausible by a further description of divine essence revealing itself: "*this pure universal* [essence or substance] is however manifest as [the human] self."⁴⁹ Here Hegel is continuing his analysis of conscience, where universal substance (or God) appeared as the universal thinking of human subjectivity. Thus the human self is the ultimate appearance (or incarnation)

⁴³ Ibid. 405.25.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 387.27.

⁴⁵ W. H. Werkmeister, "Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind as a Development of Kant's Basic Ontology," in *Hegel and the Philosophy of Religion: The Wofford Symposium*, ed. Darrel E. Christensen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970) 93–110, develops accurately Hegel's view of divine-human unity: "it is in our own self-consciousness that the Absolute attains knowledge and understanding of itself" (102). Werkmeister links this view to the incarnation of God in Jesus (106–7) but does not explore its possible universality.

⁴⁶ *Phänomenologie* 405.22–25.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 405.25–36.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 406.9–10.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 406.3.

of universal divine essence. But such an argument supposes any self whatever, and cannot be restricted to a single human being; for any self which thinks universally is the appearance of God.

Hegel then concludes by stating that "divine nature is the same [thing] as human [nature],⁵⁰ and this unity is what is viewed"⁵¹ in the incarnation of God. Here the formulation is so general that it cannot be restricted to a single person. Human nature belongs to all humans and therefore all of them are divine in principle, insofar as they submit their individual thinking to universal divine essence. Again we find that Hegel's explanation of Christian faith implies a position somewhat different from what faith maintains. For faith Jesus is the unique incarnation and highest revelation of God; but for Hegel (as I understand him) the self in general by its universal thinking reveals universal divine essence. Consequently Hegelian philosophy cannot restrict divine incarnation to the single instance of Jesus Christ.

So far my argument has appealed to Hegel's explanatory language. The argument may appear slender because it presses the universal meaning of terms and disregards the meaning they possess in Christian faith. One can always suppose that Hegel wanted to be loyal to Christianity and simply failed to use language precise enough to preserve an orthodox Christian meaning. Such a supposition however has no textual basis. On the contrary, the language of his text supports the principle of a more universal divine incarnation.

Moreover, his argument *requires* this type of interpretation. If the basis for Hegel's understanding of incarnation lies in the appearance of universal divine essence as the universal thinking of human subjectivity, then incarnation is necessarily connected to universality. This universal God appears as universal thinking, which by definition cannot be restricted to a single person but must be common to all. Consequently the very principle of incarnation calls for its universal extension to all who know themselves as universal thinking. For universality marks not simply the universal object of thought, but also the subjective thinking of it. Such thinking is universal not only within a given individual subject but also in multiple human subjects who equal one another in their universal thinking. Thus the one divine essence must appear in all of them. The incarnation of God in Jesus thereby extends itself to the universal Church.

The Christian Church

Hegel appeals to this universal appearance of God when he explains the transition from the earthly Jesus to the Christian Church. Only a

⁵⁰ But insofar as God and human being are distinct moments of one concept, they are also "*different*" (ibid. 416.15).

⁵¹ Ibid. 406.9–10.

community of universal-minded individuals, he argues, can do justice to the universality of divine essence. The individual incarnation of God must disappear and give way to a common one, where a whole community becomes conscious of itself as the divine presence by subordinating individualism to universal knowing.⁵² For divine essence to be truly universal in fact, its unique individual appearance (namely, Jesus) must disappear and be replaced by the universal spirit of the Church.

Hegel argues for this development by pointing out the deficiency of a single incarnation. When "abstract [divine] essence . . . has natural [material] existence and personal actuality"⁵³ in Jesus alone, but not in anyone else, it has only a single individual actuality rather than a universal one. However, divine essence by definition includes everything, for "absolute essence would have only this empty name [of absolute] if in truth there [were] an *other* [than] it, if there were a *fall* from it."⁵⁴ Thus no human being can be excluded from divine essence, which must refer universally to all humans. But in Jesus divine essence does not yet have this universal existence, since its universality remains enclosed in the individual person of Jesus. It becomes universal "spirit"⁵⁵ in fact only when its incarnate "being other [than essence] or its [individual] sensory presence [in Jesus] is taken back . . . and posited as surmounted, as *universal*,"⁵⁶ or as present in all members of the Church.

And such a universalizing "reconciles absolute essence with itself,"⁵⁷ because as universally present "essence has become itself in it [s universal sensory presence among humans]; the immediate existence of actuality has ceased to be an [existence] alien or external to it, by being surmounted, universal."⁵⁸ Divine essence recovers its universality when the universal presence of divine Spirit replaces the individual presence of God in Jesus.

Thus Hegel neatly explains the death of Jesus and the beginning of the Church as a simple requirement of his concept of God: divine essence is universal, and includes all reality; its universal extension calls for the death of a single incarnation and for the foundation of a universal Church. When divine essence moves from "its sensory presence (*Gegenwart*)"⁵⁹ in the individual Jesus to a wider presence in the whole Church, "essence has become itself in it[s sensory presence]"⁶⁰ because this presence is now a universal one. Divine essence is "reconciled with itself"⁶¹ only when its "immediate existence of [human] actuality . . . is universal,"⁶² and it is universal only when actually

⁵² See *ibid.* 419.1–2: "its particularity dies away in its universality, that is, in its *knowing* . . ."

⁵³ *Ibid.* 415.5–6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 415.6–8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 415.6.

⁶² *Ibid.* 415.8–10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 415.23–24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 415.3–4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 415.8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 415.4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 415.8–10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 415.4.

present in a number of individuals. For the concept, the universality of God's presence is based on the self-identity of essence as universal.

But can Hegel really mean that the Church is a universal incarnation? To be sure, one can resist this conclusion by appealing to Christian doctrine, where incarnation and ecclesiology deal with different kinds of divine-human unity: the Word is fully incarnate in Jesus but the Spirit is not fully incarnate in the Church. Hegel does not consider these distinctions, however, since for him the incarnation depends not on a hypostatic (or personal) union⁶³ of two natures but on the recognition that universal divine essence appears as universal thinking in human subjectivity. For him the difference between the incarnate Word and the indwelling Spirit is not qualitative but merely extensive: individual as different from universal.

Hegel's language confirms this interpretation. Most significant is his description of the Church as "the universal divine human"⁶⁴ in contrast to Jesus as "the *individual* divine human."⁶⁵ Here they differ only by extension and not by the quality or degree of their divinity. Nor can we assume that by "universal divine human"⁶⁶ Hegel really means the glorified Christ present in his community, for he immediately explains his phrase "universal divine human" as "the community" itself⁶⁷ rather than its hidden Lord.

In his analysis of the Church, Hegel emphasizes not its hidden head but rather its real existence as "the allness of selves"⁶⁸ where "spirit [or God in human form] is . . . posited . . . in *universal* [namely, every] *self-consciousness*"⁶⁹ as "its *community*."⁷⁰ Following the example of Jesus in daily life, Christian self-consciousness lets "its particularity die away in its universality,"⁷¹ that is, in its *knowing*.⁷² Every Christian's universal knowing "is essence reconciling itself with itself"⁷³ because in universal knowing essence appears as essence. Thus Chris-

⁶³ If it were a personal union, Strauss's position would face a major difficulty, namely that human individuality would then be a mere appearance of the Logos (Min, "The Trinity" 178). Aquinas was aware of the same difficulty (*Summa theologiae* 3, q. 3, a. 7, and ad 2). But for Hegel the union is essential (*Phänomenologie* 405.25, 387.27) rather than personal, universal rather than unique: God is the universal essence from which all individual persons derive their being. The unity is not the result of a unique conjunction of two different essences (or natures) but rather the normal development of a determinate essence (human being) from universal (divine) essence.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 421.4

⁶⁵ Ibid. 421.2-3.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 421.4.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 407.29.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 416.6-7.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 417.7.

⁷¹ Here "universal" refers to the universal thinking of an individual; in *Phänomenologie* 416.6-7 (quoted in my previous sentence), it refers to every individual Christian. These two meanings belong together; individual thinking formulates universal objects which appear in all human thinking, or universally. In its universal knowing individual subjectivity is the appearance of universal essence and so is always more than individual. As an incarnation of the universal God, individual subjectivity implies the universal existence of community.

⁷² Ibid. 419.1-2.

⁷³ Ibid. 419.2; see also 415.3-4, 420.20-21.

tian living observes the same principle of universal knowing that led to "the appearing God"⁷⁴ of conscience and to the individual appearance of the "pure universal"⁷⁵ divine essence as the individual "self"⁷⁶ of Jesus. In all these cases divine presence appears through the universal knowing of human subjectivity. What makes God present in the Church is "this depth of the pure self"⁷⁷ in its universal thinking. For Hegel divine presence occurs in the Church through human knowing and not through the hidden power of the glorified Christ. Therefore when Hegel calls the Church "the universal divine human,"⁷⁸ he must mean that the Church is as divine as "the individual divine human."⁷⁹ They differ (as we said before) not in divinity but only by their different extensiveness.

In fact one could argue that for Hegel the Church is even more divine than Jesus, since its universality conforms better to the universal dominion of divine essence. In contrast to this Church, the individual appearance of God in Jesus was not fully equal to the universality of essence; it was in fact "an [existence] alien or external to it,"⁸⁰ and so it needs to be completed by the Church. Such language clearly indicates that the universal Church gives a better appearance of deity than did the individual Jesus. The "universal divine human, the community"⁸¹ provides a better revelation for universal divine essence than does "the individual divine human."⁸² And so once again we have to understand Hegel as maintaining something like a universal incarnation of God, contrary to the common teaching of the Church.

This conclusion holds true even though Hegel never uses the phrase "universal incarnation." Since he describes the unity of God and Jesus in more or less the same way as the unity of God and other people, Hegel must not find any substantial difference between Jesus and other humans. Therefore it seems reasonable to speak of a universal incarnation (for Hegel's philosophy) comparable in quality to the unique incarnation maintained by Christianity.

Of course Hegel recognizes that Christian eschatological hope opposes his own conclusion by imagining its full unity with God as "a distant [thing] of the future."⁸³ But for him this hope indicates a deficiency in the Church, for "this community is . . . not yet completed in this its self-consciousness";⁸⁴ it is not yet conscious of its full union with God, but knows it only as a distant object promised for the future. This distance indicates once again religion's "form of *imagining* (*Vorstellen*),"⁸⁵ which Hegel describes in another context as "not yet the form of *thinking* itself, of the concept as concept."⁸⁶

⁷⁴ Ibid. 362.28–29.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 420.26.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 415.9.

⁸³ Ibid. 421.1.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 407.27–28.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 406.3.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 421.4.

⁸¹ Ibid. 421.4.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 420.9.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 421.2–3.

⁸² Ibid. 421.2–3.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 420.10.

Yet how would Hegel's concept differ from the Church's eschatological imagining? To say that the concept shows only the necessity of this eschatological future does not do justice to Hegel's text, which here criticizes imagination for viewing a different *future*. Since Christian imagination places unity with God in the future, the concept must place it in the present. But according to Hegel the Church already thinks of God as present in the community. Therefore the concept must go further, by thinking of God as *fully* present in the community—implying once again a universal incarnation. Despite its thinking of God as present in all selves of the community, the Christian Church lacks a universal concept that would comprehend all human being as the real existence of divine essence. This deficiency opens the way to philosophy—the “absolute knowing” which surpasses religion.

Philosophy

Hegel's “absolute knowing” is a “speculative knowing” which resembles Christianity. His description of their congruence is difficult; I try to explain the meaning through notes and bracketed additions to Hegel's own text:⁸⁷

God is attainable only in pure speculative knowing, and is only in it and is only it itself, for He is spirit; and this speculative knowing is [also] the knowing of the manifest [or Christian] religion. That [speculative knowing, namely the tripartite Hegelian system of logic, nature, and spirit] knows Him as *thinking*⁸⁸ or pure essence, and [then knows] this thinking as being and as [empirical] existence [in the natural world], and [finally knows this empirical] existence as the negativity [or opposite]⁸⁹ of itself, thereby as [human] self [or spirit], [both as] *this* [individual self, namely subjectivity as individual] and [also as each instance of human subjectivity, namely as] universal self; just this [is what] the manifest religion knows [too].

In other words, Christianity—despite its use of imagining—remains true because it coincides with Hegel's philosophy. Two more particular points in this text call for special comment.

First, there is Hegel's claim in the first sentence that speculative knowing not only knows God but *is* God. Since God is universal divine essence appearing as universal thinking in human subjectivity, different kinds of universal thinking may qualify as divine appearance; but the best kind is philosophy, the pure thinking of universal metaphysics and logic. It follows however that God appears in the philosopher even

⁸⁷ Ibid. 407.1–7.

⁸⁸ Here “thinking” refers not to a conscious mind but to logic or thought, as indicated by its equivalence to “pure essence.” Thinking in the active sense appears later in the quotation, as the “self” of human being.

⁸⁹ In Hegelian thought, a determinate state usually implies an opposite or contrary, which leads to a higher integration. Thus nature implies thinking, which synthesizes it.

more profoundly than in Jesus.⁹⁰ Divine incarnation therefore cannot be restricted to Jesus alone in the system of Hegel, because universal divine essence is accessible to many types of universal thinking and most of all to pure philosophy.

Second, there is the description of God in the second sentence as the three parts of the Hegelian system: logic, natural being, and self or spirit. In the system spirit can be considered both as "*this* [individual self, namely subjectivity as individual] and [also as each instance of human subjectivity, namely as] universal self"⁹¹ because what applies to one self must apply to all. Given the generality of logic, this conclusion is reasonable; speculative thinking envisages the self in general, or every self. An individual self can be recognized as divine because every self has an intellect which manifests divine essence. Thus philosophy "knows Him [i.e. God] as . . . *this* [individual] and [as] universal self,"⁹² i.e. as both individual human personality and as every rational instance of it. Christianity has the same knowledge of God when it knows the individual self of Jesus as God incarnate and then the Church as God's universal divine presence.⁹³

Hegel's description of his philosophy thus provides us with a good clue to his own thinking on the incarnation. Through speculative thinking he applies to Christianity the incarnational principle that emerged in his analysis of conscience, namely divine essence appearing as universal thinking in human subjectivity. He then draws the conclusion implied by Christian ecclesiology, namely that the incarnation must be universal in principle.

The extent to which this happens also measures the extent of Hegel's unorthodox interpretation; for by understanding divine incarnation as the appearance of universal essence in human intelligence, Hegel supplies no reason to limit this incarnation to the single person of Jesus. He does of course recognize that Christians honor Jesus as the unique incarnation of God. But his own explanation of the basis for their belief makes the belief seem incomplete. Hegel indeed supports Christian faith in God incarnate, because it anticipates his own position that divine substance expresses itself through human subjectivity. But whereas Christian faith or imagining exalts the uniqueness of Christ, Hegel develops concepts that apply to all human beings. Consequently

⁹⁰ But here the following distinction should apply: though God appears in a superior way through philosophical *thinking*, a nonphilosopher (like Jesus) can surpass the philosopher in moral *behavior*. Such behavior applies universal thinking to empirical reality, and so manifests universal divine essence in real existence.

⁹¹ *Phänomenologie* 407.6.

⁹² *Ibid.* 407.4, 6.

⁹³ The Church's knowing does of course restrict the full incarnation of God to Jesus alone — a restriction that does not appear in speculative knowledge, because philosophy (unlike religion) has "the form of *thinking* itself, of the concept as concept" (*ibid.* 407.28) or of pure universal essence which develops itself into the universal thinking of every rational human being.

his philosophical exposition of the incarnation contains a criticism of Christian imagination, which recognizes only Jesus as God incarnate.

THE INCARNATION IN HEGEL'S *LECTURES ON RELIGION*

Between his *Phenomenology* (1807) and his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (from 1821 to 1831),⁹⁴ Hegel wrote no separate treatise on religious topics. The lectures on religion develop the religious themes treated earlier by the *Phenomenology*, and it is natural to wonder whether any significant changes in his thinking have occurred.

Conflicting Evidence

If we pursue Hegel's treatment of the incarnation in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, we discover some new emphases, along with some expressions already familiar to readers of the *Phenomenology*. But his interpretation of the incarnation has not changed at all, as the following paragraphs will argue.

In the *Lectures*, the "unity of divine and human nature"⁹⁵ appears in slightly different forms quite often⁹⁶ from 1821 through 1831 in Hegel's treatment of "reconciliation." For example, a passage from the 1824 lectures reads: "in itself divine and human nature is not different—God [is] in human shape."⁹⁷ Another from 1827 says practically the same thing: "the substantiality of the unity of divine and human nature comes to consciousness . . . the human appears to it as God and God [appears] to it as human."⁹⁸ Such passages refer to the single incarnation of God in Jesus; they do not suggest anything more than

⁹⁴ Specifically in 1821, 1824, 1827, 1831. For a description of the four cycles of lectures and their treatment of Christianity, see Hodgson's introduction to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3: *The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. Robert F. Brown et al. (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 9–57. Vol. 3 is hereafter referred to as *Consummate Religion*; the whole work, as *Lectures*.

⁹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Teil 3: *Die vollendete Religion*, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1984) 46.301–2. This particular volume is hereafter referred to as *Vollendete Religion*; the whole set of lectures on religion, as *Vorlesungen über Religion*. Jaeschke's German edition has line numbers for each document; the reference just given in this note thus refers to *Vollendete Religion*, page 46, lines 301–2. The German edition is volume 5 of a larger series of Hegel's *Vorlesungen* published by Felix Meiner. Hodgson's English translation (above, n. 94) refers in the margins to the corresponding pages of Jaeschke's German edition, so that references to *Vollendete Religion* (the German text) can be found easily in *Consummate Religion* (the English translation). I have used Hodgson's edition as my first resource for finding texts, and have consulted it whenever attempting my own translations from the German.

⁹⁶ *Vollendete Religion* 45.283–84, 46.301–2, 143.437–38, 146.518–19, 235–36.702–3, 236–37.707–8, 239.758–59, 283.151–52.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 146.518–19.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 236–37.707–9.

that. But the concept of divine-human unity itself implies its universal extension, even if Hegel does not draw this conclusion explicitly.

A few paragraphs from the 1821 manuscript⁹⁹ do suggest this conclusion in a striking way. There Hegel offers two good indications of a universal incarnation, but then discourages this interpretation by pointing only to the single person of Jesus. First, "in itself God's objectivity [is] realized; in all humans immediately."¹⁰⁰ According to these words, divine essence exists in all humanity, and therefore the incarnation of God should be general rather than unique. Another text points to the same conclusion. In it Hegel explains why God becomes incarnate in a human being rather than in another species: "the universal posited as universal exists only in the subjectivity of consciousness."¹⁰¹ This argument echoes the one for "the appearing God" in the *Phenomenology*¹⁰² where conscience developed the principle of incarnation used by religion in general and by Christianity in particular. In the *Phenomenology* divine essence appears as human because universal essence emerges in real existence as the universal thinking of human subjectivity. Since the 1821 manuscript refers (though briefly) to the same argument, we can infer that Hegel's understanding of the incarnation has not changed significantly since the writing of his *Phenomenology* 14 years earlier. And furthermore, the recurrence of this particular argument in the lectures allows us to conclude that just as the *Phenomenology* implies a universal incarnation, so too does the 1821 manuscript: if universal essence appears as universal thinking, then its appearance must coincide with human thinking in general.

But Hegel does not press this point in 1821. Instead he recognizes that Christianity limits the incarnation of God to a single human individual. The idea . . . for them [namely humans]¹⁰³ [is] . . . only in this individual.¹⁰⁴ For Christians the incarnation occurs only as a singular event. And again: "the idea is for them [namely humans] only as in this individual, and [there is] only one such individual . . . infinite unity—subjectivity—in this [individual]."¹⁰⁵ Such passages reflect the common Christian belief in the unique incarnation. The belief is "for them"; it is their belief; and Hegel's phrase "for them" suggests a possible distancing of his view from theirs. Furthermore this unique incarnation itself has universal overtones for Hegel. Expressions like "once is always"¹⁰⁶ and "in one—[are] all"¹⁰⁷ do not seem to restrict divine presence to Jesus alone. If in the one person Jesus all are included, then what is predicated of him should apply to all. The same conclusion follows even if there is "only one Son in [the] eternal

⁹⁹ Ibid. 47–49.342–96.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 48.369–71.

¹⁰³ Hegel's phrase *für sie* appears to refer to *allen Menschen* (*Vollendete Religion* 48.343). Hodgson translates *für sie* as "for humanity" (*Consummate Religion* 112).

¹⁰⁴ *Vollendete Religion* 48.358.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 49.392.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 47–48.342–43.

¹⁰² *Phänomenologie* 362.28–29.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 49.385–86.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 49.381–82.

idea.”¹⁰⁸ As the universal essence for all of reality, the one eternal idea realizes itself in every rational human being. The one Son of the idea thus multiplies into many real sons and daughters. In contrast to this, the unique incarnation seems to limit God’s universal truth.

On the other hand, Hegel seems to agree with Christian belief when he claims that the Son “is *this* unique [individual], not *several*. . . . In several, divinity becomes an abstraction.”¹⁰⁹ A unique incarnation avoids abstraction and so emphasizes the reality of God’s presence in Jesus. But the reality does not seem to end with Jesus, for “in *one*—[are] all.”¹¹⁰ The very argument for a single incarnation has universal implications, because a single clear case illustrates the universal far more decisively than would a number of cases that still did not include all. A plurality of incarnations would not refer to all human beings universally, because many others would still not be included in the group. In emphasizing the single incarnation of God in Jesus, Hegel argues not against a universal one but only against a selectively universal one that would refer to “some but not all.” A single incarnation is preferable just because it better illustrates the universal concept of God’s presence in every individual human subjectivity.

In 1827 Hegel again suggests a universal meaning while emphasizing the unique incarnation. Since “the unity of divine and human nature . . . is the [objective essence] in itself of humans,”¹¹¹ a universal incarnation seems implied. On the other hand, this “unity of divine and human nature must appear in a [single] human,”¹¹² for two distinct reasons. First, “because it is not a question of the thought of humanity but of sensory certainty”¹¹³ which knows only individual empirical beings.¹¹⁴ God’s unique appearance corresponds to human consciousness, which begins with individual beings and recognizes only them as really existing; thus only a single incarnation is appropriate for immediate sensory experience. Second, a unique incarnation separates divine appearance from the rest of experience, and thereby shows divine-human unity as an idea “beyond immediate consciousness, [beyond] normal consciousness and knowing.”¹¹⁵ According to this reason God (as essence) lies beyond empirical knowledge and so is different from empirical beings. This difference appears in a single incarnation which makes the Son different from other humans.¹¹⁶

In the lectures of 1831 we find an additional reason for a unique incarnation: “As spirit . . . God contains the moment of subjectivity and individuality in himself; his appearance, therefore, can only be a single

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 49.394–95.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 49.381–82.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 238.731, 742–43.

¹¹² Ibid. 238.731–32.

¹¹³ Ibid. 238.733–35.

¹¹⁴ The same idea also appears in the *Phänomenologie* (404.35–37 and elsewhere). The 1821 manuscript echoes it as well: “In several, divinity becomes an abstraction” (*Vollendete Religion* 49:381–82; *Consummate Religion* 114).

¹¹⁵ *Vollendete Religion* 238.743–44.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 238.746–49.

one, it can take place only once."¹¹⁷ Spirit is the appearance of divine essence as individual self-consciousness, which requires a single separate personality.

Hegel's reasoning in both 1827 and 1831 does provide some attractive arguments. But still one wonders whether they explain the single incarnation as a phenomenon of Christian belief or whether they offer the final position of speculative philosophy as well. Perhaps Hegel is merely attempting to explain why God appeared to Christians through a single incarnation. Such an explanation would not necessarily correspond to the ultimate truth as philosophy understands it. We have already seen the universal implications of texts from the 1821 manuscript. The ones from 1827 and 1831 do not point in the same direction—at least not on the surface. The surface meaning however causes problems, as the following considerations will show.

The Evidence Analyzed

Taken together, the lectures from 1827 and 1831 provide three arguments for an individual incarnation: (1) sensory certainty knows things as individual, (2) God is different and therefore individual, and (3) subjectivity is always individual. Now the first argument can be easily interpreted as a pedagogical accommodation. God must appear as individual because only individuals have empirical reality, and therefore only individuals can be known with sensory certainty; if God appeared as many individuals, the reality of divine-human unity would not be so clearly and decisively impressed upon humans. Likewise for the second argument: God must appear as individual in order to show the distinctive reality of deity, which would be obscured if God appeared in more than one human. Again the argument seems directed toward making a forceful impression upon human knowing. The third argument links individuality to spirit. But individual subjectivity can hardly be limited to a single person, since "I" applies to everyone. Divine spirit does contain subjectivity, but as the universal essence it should contain *every* subjectivity rather than just a single one.

This last point leads to a deeper (and more systematic) problem in the interpretation of Hegel. If God can appear only as one human person because divine spirit "contains the moment of subjectivity and individuality,"¹¹⁸ divine essence is imagined as a separate subject resembling the discrete subjects of empirical being. The other two arguments carry the same implication. God is imagined as a separate subject if it befits the distinctiveness of God as an idea "beyond immediate

¹¹⁷ *Consummate Religion* 315 n. 173. I did not find the quoted passage in Jaeschke's German edition. It comes from the 1840 edition of the *Werke*; see *Consummate Religion* 47–48 for the *Werke*'s relation to the 1831 lectures. For Strauss's transcript of this point, see *ibid.* 366.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 315 n. 173.

consciousness"¹¹⁹ to appear as a distinctive human being, separate from other humans; and again if "sensory certainty"¹²⁰ needs an individual incarnation in order to be convinced of the truth of divine-human unity. The three reasons from 1827 and 1831 converge in their common understanding of a separate subjectivity for God incarnate. The position they represent corresponds well to traditional Christianity and its belief in God as a distinct and transcendent person (or persons).

But this position leads to difficulties within a Hegelian outlook. If divine subjectivity appears only in the humanity of Jesus, it remains a subject separate from other human beings. The distinct personality of the incarnate Son reflects the separateness of God as a transcendent being. In the *Phenomenology* however such a separation was unsatisfactory, and so it led to the further developments of the Christian Church and absolute knowing. The separate subjectivity of an individual incarnation was necessary to bring home to human consciousness the truth of divine-human unity, for only a unique incarnation, or the incarnation in a unique individual, could reveal the unity of deity with individual human subjectivity. But once this truth was manifest in an individual incarnation, spirit had to show its universal extent, which led to the Christian Church as the more universal expression of absolute spirit. The Church however fails to grasp its full unity with God in the present, since it continues to imagine God as transcendent. Its eschatological hope indicates that its unity with God is not yet realized. And since Hegel criticizes Christianity for such a view, then his absolute knowing has to be interpreted as correcting the defect by a concept of universal divine-human unity in the present.

Now if we fit the *Lectures* into the scheme of the *Phenomenology* we can easily understand that the unique incarnation (as portrayed in the lectures) was necessary, for the reasons Hegel has given. But spirit cannot remain there, because "in itself divine and human nature is not different";¹²¹ and so deity must include all of humanity. For Hegel the doctrine of reconciliation (of God with sinful humans) universalizes the divine-human unity found in the incarnation. If we abstract from the traditional Christian understanding of incarnation and reconciliation, we see that for Hegel they both express the same type of unity; they differ only by their different extensiveness.

A unique incarnation conceals the universality of the idea, which properly pertains to all individual subjects. Its conceptual universality is not revealed to religion, for then religion would become philosophy. Grasping the idea through an individual incarnation is proper to religion and serves to distinguish it from philosophy. All of Hegel's reasons for the individual incarnation serve to justify the Christian faith, for they explain why an individual incarnation is "necessary." It seems

¹¹⁹ *Vollendete Religion* 238.743.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 238.734-35.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 146.518-19.

necessary however only for preconceptual thinking, which discovers divine-human unity through an individual case. In fact an individual case best illustrates the concept of spirit as God's appearance in *individual* subjectivity. But philosophy (as in Hegel's *Phenomenology*) moves beyond individual cases to universal principles. And then the unity of divine and human nature appears to refer to a universal kind of incarnation rather than to a single one. Hegel's reasons for a unique incarnation explain Christian belief in the singular empirical existence of God incarnate, but they do not do justice to the universal side of divine essence.

This latter aspect hovers in the background in the *Lectures* without ever taking center stage. From time to time it steps forth, however, to remind us of its existence. Thus a passage from the 1824 lectures clearly expresses the universality of divine essence, which includes everything empirical. The passage reads:

the truth could appear . . . in manifold sensory ways, for the idea is one in all, universal necessity; actuality can only be a mirror (*Spiegel*) of the idea. Consequently the idea can emerge for consciousness from everything, for it is always the idea [that is] in these infinitely many drops which mirror back (*widerspiegeln*) the idea.¹²²

As the context makes clear, the sensory content "elevated to the universal"¹²³ idea is the humanity of Jesus; the universal idea appears in him when the community believes in his divinity.¹²⁴ But if this content could appear "in manifold sensory ways,"¹²⁵ God incarnate could appear as any suitable person,¹²⁶ and the principle of universal incarna-

¹²² *Ibid.* 156.837-42.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 156.846.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* 156-57.862-64.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 156.837-38.

¹²⁶ Hegel's argument as presented here also explains a similar passage that Yerkes (*Christology of Hegel* 236-37 n. 80 [SUNY ed., 253-54 n. 80]) honestly (and admirably) admits cannot be reconciled with his interpretation. According to this passage (from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*), the individual existence of Christ is not strictly necessary for our knowledge of God. When divine incarnation reflects a universal idea, any suitable human being can express the universal concept of divine-human unity. What prevents Yerkes from reaching this viewpoint is his desire to preserve the uniqueness of Jesus within the ontological universality (see n. 13 above and the corresponding quotation in my text) of divine-human unity: "the incarnational principle is not fully revealed except in one man" (*Christology of Hegel* 173 [SUNY ed., 120-21]). And further: "If such knowledge is transcended epistemologically, it is also at once necessarily preserved" (*Christology of Hegel* 200 [SUNY ed., 143]). From a religious perspective Yerkes is correct. But since the full revelation of Hegel's God comes through philosophy, the permanent preeminence of Jesus (from an ontological perspective) seems very questionable. Even as the best revealer of ontological truth, Jesus has no unique position in its content; the moment of revelation has no lasting importance for a universal truth of reason, as Kierkegaard conceded in his *Philosophical Fragments*. For Hegelian ontology history does furnish clues (like the Christian belief in a unique incarnation), but such historical facts do not ground universal ontological truth. Since the Hegelian system develops itself by a priori thinking (Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, end of §12), the system should be able to support itself. The same criticism applies to Löwith's claim (198, 202) that Hegel's thought presupposes the Holy Spirit of Pentecost. The universal truth of God's

tion is clearly implied; an individual appearance would only be the accidental occasion for the universal truth of divine-human unity to first appear. If every part of sensory actuality reflects the idea, it is hard to avoid concluding that divine-human unity could be expressed by any human being. As "one in all"¹²⁷ the divine essence must imply the "universal necessity"¹²⁸ of divine-human unity.

It remains true however that this "universal necessity" is less clear in the *Lectures* than in the *Phenomenology*, even though several passages in the *Lectures* do hint at it. A good explanation for this difference in the two works may be found in the scope Hegel gave to each of them. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel integrates religion into other types of knowing, and indeed derives its peculiar themes (like the incarnation) from the common resources of human knowing. And since religion in that earlier work leads to Hegel's own system, he has to explain religion as preparing for the conceptual knowing of his own philosophy. In particular, the individual incarnation of God in Jesus and the incomplete presence of God in the church belong to the inferior knowing of imagination, which the pure universal knowing of the Hegelian concept should surpass. Consequently religion in the *Phenomenology* is always described with a view to the system to which the whole *Phenomenology* serves as an introduction.¹²⁹ When Hegel explains religious themes like the incarnation in this early work, the explanations indicate a radical rethinking of religion, because he interprets religion as a lesser form of his own philosophy.

In the *Lectures* this pressure has relaxed. Religious imagination does not constantly stand in the shadow of the philosophical concept, and so it often seems to enjoy a strength of its own, which Hegel describes with much admiration. Without ever letting religion stand entirely on its own—for the very title of the lectures makes religion into a field of study for philosophy—Hegel does accept it as a distinct branch of knowledge and seems more willing to explain it on its own terms. Since the *Lectures* (unlike the *Phenomenology*) do not follow the progress of knowledge to conceptual knowing, there is no need for Hegel to explicate the universal unity of God and human being, which contains the principle of universal incarnation. In the *Lectures* for the most part he dwells on the individual appearance of God in Jesus, and therefore seems to remain more faithful to Christian belief. As a result his Christianity resembles church doctrine more in the *Lectures* than in the *Phenomenology*. But this more conventional appearance does not mean that Hegel abandoned the views of his earlier *Phenomenology*.

presence in human being depends not on Pentecost but on reason. Approaches like Löwith's and Yerkes's do not pay enough attention to Hegel's logical or metaphysical idea of God, which is the true ground for divine-human unity and for anything else one may find in the Hegelian system.

¹²⁷ *Vollendete Religion* 156.838.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 156.838–39.

¹²⁹ See *Gesammelte Werke* 9, V.1.3 (see above n. 5).

On the contrary, that earlier book provides the philosophical context for correctly interpreting his later lectures on religion. The 1831 lectures¹³⁰ repeat the *Phenomenology's* claim that religion remains imagination and thus lacks the true form of thinking.¹³¹ When it does acquire the true form of thinking, its doctrine of incarnation has to become universal, as the *Phenomenology* had suggested a quarter of a century earlier.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing exposition we can better appreciate Hegel's interpretation of Christianity, especially its doctrine of the incarnation.

According to Hegel Christian faith in the unique incarnation of God in Jesus not only expresses the fundamental truth of divine-human unity, but also emphasizes the appearance of that unity in *individual* subjectivity. When Hegel gives that unity a universal extension, he still preserves the individual meaning of human personality: the incarnation extends to all rational human beings not collectively but individually, as personal subjects. Multiple incarnations follow from Hegel's view of God as an underlying essence individualizing itself in human subjectivity. God is then present in every rational human being.

Philosophy universalizes this incarnation simply through the universality of its concepts. Christianity anticipates this conclusion by its recognition of Spirit in the Church, which universalizes divine presence from the single person of Jesus to the whole body of Christ. However, the Church fails to grasp the full implication of Spirit's universal presence by continuing to think of God as transcendent and separate. For the Church a unique incarnation of God preserves divine transcendence; but for Hegel the universal incarnation eliminates transcendence.

Strauss correctly grasped Hegel's meaning of the divinity of the whole Church. However, Strauss's tendency to view the universal incarnation as a collective one supposes a nonconceptual image of collective humanity. For Hegel himself collective actuality is only an image of the concept, whereas universal essence (properly conceived) becomes individual existence in every instance of its realization. Thus the incarnation of God occurs in human individuals, rather than in a collective humanity.

There are then two levels of image that precede that concept of divine-human unity: the image of an individual incarnation as found

¹³⁰ Found in the *Werke* and in Strauss's transcript of the 1831 lectures but not in the 1821 manuscript nor in the transcripts from 1824 and 1827, the passage probably comes from the 1831 lectures; see Hodgson, *Consummate Religion* 47–48.

¹³¹ *Vollendete Religion* 289.394–98. Hodgson's note (*Consummate Religion* 374 n. 31) refers the reader to the *Werke's* version of this point (*ibid.* 346 n. 265).

in Jesus; and the image of a universal incarnation, as found in the Christian Church. The concept points to both types insofar as it contains a universal divine essence that individualizes itself in any number of rational human beings.

Thus the concept preserves the meaning of Christianity, but also goes beyond it. Philosophy does retain the Christian doctrines of an incarnation of God in Jesus and of a universal Spirit in the Church. These images are obviously true, according to the concept of divine essence giving itself real existence in every human subject. But the concept surpasses these images by recognizing in every human being the same kind of divine-human unity imagined only in Jesus. Here the Hegelian concept is bolder than Christianity. By shifting divine-human unity from the Church's eschatological future (and its transcendent God) into the present, Hegel places into existing human being the same divine presence found in Jesus. The unique position of Jesus as the sole incarnation of God is replaced by the universally conceptual incarnation referring to every rational subject reflecting God's presence in thought.¹³²

Nor can the Christian meaning of a unique incarnation remain within philosophy, which thinks through universal concepts. The passage from religion to philosophy is effected by passing from image (*Vorstellung*) to concept. But the uniqueness of Jesus requires an image, which places in a single individual a universal meaning; and apart from the image this uniqueness disappears.

In his review of Göschel in 1829, during his Berlin period when he was lecturing on religion, Hegel refers to the use of images within philosophy. Göschel wanted to promote his Christian version of Hegel's philosophy by maintaining that "thought is not the highest, but *image, shape* . . . as . . . the appearance of essence."¹³³ This proposal would obviously bring the image of Christ into speculative philosophy; but Hegel rejects it. He does concede that the going back and forth "*from image to concept and from concept to image* . . . is present in scholarly meditation,"¹³⁴ but only as a distraction; for later in the same paragraph he insists that philosophy should "forcibly hold back from" images which "bring the danger of yielding to laziness [while] in the rigor of . . . thought."¹³⁵ Since Hegel refuses to admit images into specula-

¹³² Though only philosophers may recognize this concept, it refers not only to them but to every human intelligence that recognizes God within itself. The Christian Church rightly sees itself as divine presence even though (according to Hegel) it does not fully comprehend the universal extent of divine-human unity.

¹³³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Berliner Schriften*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956) 295–329, at 318. A review of Carl Friedrich Göschel's *Aphorismen über Nichtwissen und absolutes Wissen im Verhältnis zur christlichen Glaubenserkenntnis*, Hegel's article was first published in *Jahrbücher für Wissenschaftliche Kritik*, 1829.

¹³⁴ *Berliner Schriften* 318.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 319.

tive philosophy, one must conclude that such philosophy has no place for the "image" of Christ as the unique incarnation of God.

Nevertheless Yerkes¹³⁶ argues that Jesus retains an epistemic importance within the ontological universality of divine-human unity. In other words, all humans incarnate God but Jesus is unique as the first revealer of divine-human unity. Thus he will always remain the revealer of this truth to the human race. This appears to be a good way for a Hegelian to safeguard the Christian primacy of Jesus. Since religion precedes philosophy, the unique image of Christ precedes the concept and in fact reveals it.

One wonders however whether Hegel himself would agree with such a claim. Without doubt the Christian religion does reveal to philosophy the concept of divine-human unity. But this is before philosophy begins its own work. When thinking for itself, speculative philosophy has to ground its own content in a priori reason rather than in revelation or history. As a self-grounding thought the concept cannot appeal to history for its truth, except as illustration or confirmation. What reveals the universal truth of the incarnation for philosophy is not the historical figure of Jesus but thinking itself.¹³⁷ Consequently Jesus must have only an external relation to such philosophy, and is not part of its content. His epistemic importance is thus another "image" that has no place in speculative thinking.

Such an image will of course remain an object for religion. But when philosophy develops the universal truth of divine-human unity from its own thinking, it replaces the historical revealer of religion by reason itself. Jesus then disappears into the universal essence of thought, present in every rational human thinking that reflects the presence of God.

¹³⁶ *Christology of Hegel* 288–89 (SUNY ed., 207).

¹³⁷ By basing his interpretation on Hegel's philosophy of religion rather than on the speculative system, Yerkes overlooks the latter's importance as the truest expression of Hegelian thought; see n. 126 above.