

Reality of Christian faith. Hegel, Bonhoeffer, and the Church

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Abstract

In his famous *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel unfolds a speculative theory of the Christian congregation. His reflections are based on his concept of the spirit, which can integrate its other at the place of finite subjectivity. In this way, the Christian concept of the Trinity is incorporated into the idea of ‘God existing as congregation’. Dietrich Bonhoeffer takes up this consideration in *Sanctorum Communio*, where he subjects Hegel’s concept of the congregation to a Christological critique. The mere realisation of the absolute in the history of Christianity is replaced by ‘Christ existing as a church-community’. Against this background, the Christian character of a theological ethics can be exemplified, which is committed to the Trinitarian idea of God without letting Christ disappear in a philosophical concept of spirit.

Keywords

congregation; church-community; Spirit; Christ; German idealism

1. Introduction

“Kant and Hegel have ruled millions who have never read a line of them and did not even know that they obeyed them.”¹ In his cultural philosophy of the 1920s, Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) emphasises the immense importance of classical German philosophy for our modern view of life and the world. However, he is by no means alone in this assessment but can certainly be understood in the historical context of a renewed interest in the great theories of freedom before and after the First World War. Of course,

1 Schweitzer 2007, 60.

this new idealism took different forms, depending on which protagonist from the history of philosophy one had newly committed oneself to. There is no doubt that religious or theological motifs also played a major role.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1906–1945) ecclesiological reflections in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* also belong in this context. Although he is usually not counted among the prominent neo-idealistic Lutherans of the 1920s, such as Paul Tillich, Friedrich Brunstäd or Emanuel Hirsch, it is worth looking at his peculiar reception of Hegel's philosophy of religion. Therefore, we will first reconstruct it speculative deciphering of the Christian congregation as the spiritual existence of God. It will become apparent that Hegel does not abolish the Christological foundation of faith, yet restricts it to a structural element of the Christian spirit. In contrast, the analysis of Bonhoeffer's transformation of these thoughts will reveal his Christological recalibration of ecclesiology. In a critical reception of Hegel's definition of the congregation as the spiritual existence of God, this reconfigures Christ as the head and centre of the church-community, which in this respect represents his own reality. In this way, Bonhoeffer will come into his own as an original thinker of Christianity who can appropriate essential insights of German Idealism without losing his own theological focus.

2. Hegel's concept of the Christian congregation

For Hegel, the Christian faith represents the pinnacle of religious consciousness, which in turn coexists alongside art and philosophy as a manifestation of absolute spirit in his system.² This "perfect"³ or "absolute religion"⁴ is essentially characterised by its spiritual reference to the person of the God-human Jesus Christ. Thus, Christianity begins with the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross becomes the self-annihilation of the finite being – "it is a stripping away of the human, of the negative [...] at the same time, death itself is also the negative, this highest peak of what "the human" is exposed to as natural existence: this is hereby

2 Concerning Hegel's famous Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion in general see Jaeschke 1986 and Jaeschke 2016, 413–437.

3 Hegel 1995b, 1.99.177. See Jaeschke 2016, 428–435.

4 Hegel 1995b, 179.

God himself.”⁵ The sacred story of the suffering Messiah, who obediently gives himself to death to seal God’s eternal reconciliation with humanity, provides the content of the Christian spirit.⁶

Accordingly, the religious consciousness of Christian faith, as it has gained its content from the idea of the “speculative Good Friday”⁷ or the necessary “death of God”⁸, presents itself in the proper sense as the concrete spiritualisation of the absolute. The abstract relationship between the general and the particular becomes concrete in the knowledge of the cross. According to Luther’s theology of the cross, the revelation of divine glory is conceived only under the opposite of Christ’s shame on the cross.⁹ Thus, Christian faith marks the actual transgression of finite knowledge into the spirit aware of itself in its content. “The consciousness of the church, which thus makes the transition from mere human to God-human [...] is what the congregation begins with and what constitutes the truth on which the congregation is founded.”¹⁰

Christian self-consciousness comes to itself in faith by means of its Christological content as the absolute spirit of the community, in that it has penetrated “to the contemplation, to the consciousness, to the certainty of the union, the unity of divine and human nature”.¹¹ The self-awareness of this religious breakthrough marks the new stage of the eternal spirit, which has found its concrete place and representation in the Christian community. “This is the explication of reconciliation, that [...] God has

5 Hegel 1995b, 250.

6 Cf. Hegel 1995b, 250: “The truth to which humans have arrived by means of this history [...] is this, [...] that human has attained the certainty of unity with God, that the human is directly present God, and indeed in such a way that in this history, as the spirit grasps it, is itself the representation of the process of what the human, the spirit, is: in itself God and dead - this mediation, whereby the human is stripped away, on the other hand the self-existent returns to itself and is thus only spirit.”

7 Hegel 1968, 414.

8 Hegel 1968, 414. Regarding Hegel’s concept of a speculative Good Friday and the death of God, see Schütte 1969.

9 For Martin Luther’s theology of the cross, see his Heidelberg Disputation (1518), Luther 1979. Concerning Hegel’s reception of the Lutheran theology of the cross, see Schulz 2017.

10 Hegel 1995b, 250.

11 Hegel 1995b, 250.

shown himself to be reconciled with the world, that the human is not alien to him, but that this otherness, this differentiation, this finitude [...] is a moment in himself, albeit a vanishing one.”¹²

The religious content of the Christian consciousness consists precisely in this representation of the life, suffering and death of Jesus Christ. For the finite knowledge of God, this manifests God’s infinite devotion and love for people, insofar as the eternal Logos gives up his divinity to realise God’s reconciliation with the world and people. “For the congregation, this is the story of God’s appearance. This history is divine history, through which the congregation has come to the certainty of truth.”¹³ The foundation of the Christian church itself, therefore, depends on the concrete presence of its Christological self-mediation, which of course represents nothing other than the speculative genesis and realisation of the absolute spirit itself. The abstract absolute presents itself in the mode of sacred history. The divine first comes to stand as an abstract generality to then distinguish itself from itself in the particularisation of the God-human and finally to pass over into its actual medium in the finite knowledge of the religious community of Christianity. The truth is revealed to the finite consciousness in the form of this holy story of the incarnation of God and becomes present to it in the way of believing visualisation in the assembly of believers. In this way, this Christian assembly itself becomes the representation and presence of God or the Absolute itself as Spirit, whose self-production converges precisely with the cultic re-enactment of the sacred history of Jesus Christ. “This gave rise to the awareness that God is the Triune One. The reconciliation in Christ, which is believed in, has no meaning without God being known as the Triune One: that he is, but also as the Other, as that which distinguishes itself, so that this Other is God himself, has in itself the divine nature in him, and that the abolition of this difference, otherness, that this return of love is the Spirit.”¹⁴

The actual presence of the triune God in the religious consciousness of the assembled congregation, therefore, not only marks its own speculative genesis. And even if the intellectual reconstruction or a self-speculative

12 Hegel 1995b, 250.

13 Hegel 1995b, 250–251.

14 Hegel 1995b, 251.

becoming-for-itself of this absolute spirit should be reserved for philosophical contemplation, as Hegel presented it in his lectures on the philosophy of religion, the Christian spirit thus has its own presence in the religious imagination. The Christian knowledge of the appearance of God in the incarnation, in the word and history of Jesus Christ itself represents the presence of the Spirit. In this way, the self-conscious emergence of the absolute Spirit simultaneously takes place in the mode of the appearance of the Christian God. The incarnation of the divine Logos is completed in the spiritualisation of the divine, which has its real place in the Christian congregation. The genesis of the absolute Spirit is that of the church. The appearance of God in Christ and his church is therefore the subject of a phenomenology of the Christian spirit. “The genesis of the Christian congregation itself is therefore the first thing here. [...] It is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is the spirit [that] spiritually grasps this history that proceeds in appearance, recognising in it the idea of God, his life, his movement.”¹⁵

Of course, the actual realisation of God in the Christian religion also has the finite subjectivity of faith as its prerequisite. For without an individual form of religious consciousness, the visualisation of sacred history can hardly take place. The appearance of the absolute or the absolute appearance of God in the spirit of his community also requires finite knowledge for Hegel, based on which the divine can produce or visualise itself by knowing itself as the content of that knowledge. This self-conscious knowledge of the absolute itself constitutes absolute self-consciousness. This absolute self-consciousness, which is capable of being nothing other than itself and brings this potency into being in the place of the believing heart, then reveals itself to the Christian mind as the self-consciousness of God. The revelation of the triune God is inconceivable without the finite subjectivity of the believer. The realisation of the absolute spirit depends in its genesis on the precondition of the finite spirit. “The congregation is the individual empirical subjects that are in the Spirit of God, but from which this content, this history, this truth is at the same time distinct and confronts them.”¹⁶

15 Hegel 1995b, 251–252.

16 Hegel 1995b, 252.

Thereby, the subjectivity of the believing consciousness and the imagined content of faith are brought to a concrete synthesis in the Christian congregation. The content of faith comes to coincide with it in the presence of the absolute Spirit, so that the sacred history of the appearance of the divine Logos in "the human" is repeated, as it were, at the level of the Christian congregation, in that the individual members of this community visualise this content in their finite consciousness. In this way of self-presentation of the absolute content in the finite knowledge of Christian subjectivity, the absolute spirit comes to stand not only as the temporary content of knowledge, but as the eternal realisation of the divine in the gathering community. "The emergence of faith requires firstly a person, a sensual, human appearance, and secondly the spiritual perception, the consciousness of the spiritual"¹⁷. Accordingly, the ideal realisation of the history of Jesus Christ in the finite consciousness of religious people has an essential function in the realisation of the absolute spirit, insofar as the religious subject does not merely imagine an arbitrary object with the personal appropriation of the same sensual appearance of Christ on earth. Rather, the presence of God himself in the incarnation of the Logos is comprehended as spiritual truth and thus elevated to the content and essence of religious consciousness. "[T]he authentication of the spirit"¹⁸ is based on the ideal representation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In their religious significance, however, the latter are no longer considered as empirical data of a life lived many centuries ago, but in their salvific significance for the Christian subjectivity of faith, they mark the concrete material of its own fulfilment. Faith has its essence in the exemplary "transformation of an immediate into a spiritual content"¹⁹, the history of Jesus Christ into the spirit of Christian consciousness. This is why Hegel, in contrast to the rationalist biblical hermeneutics of the Enlightenment, insists on not being able to stop at the historical analysis of the holy scriptures of Christianity. Rather, faith corresponds to itself when it makes the transition from the immediate knowledge of the biblical narrative or its historical-critical enlightenment to actual religious appropriation. While historical criticism can certainly seize the immediate

17 Hegel 1995b, 253.

18 Hegel 1995b, 253.

19 Hegel 1995b, 253.

content,²⁰ the inner testimony of the spirit lies on a completely different level. “The other [...] is the comprehension with the spirit; that which is profane is not the authentication of the spirit.”²¹

Certainly, the actual testimony of the Holy Spirit can therefore only be put into practice in the actual realisation of the ideal appropriation of the history of Jesus Christ, so that without the subjective contemplation of the appearance of the absolute, the same has no place in this world. The religious significance of the Christian idea of God’s reconciliation with humanity only gains its power insofar as this absolute content can also manifest itself in finite consciousness. Without the ideal appropriation of faith, the content of faith lacks a dwelling place; the divine is not known and is therefore not. In contrast, the religious realisation of the history of salvation in the believing consciousness turns out to be the actual self-presentation of the absolute. As faith visualises its unconditional content, the spirit authenticates the belief of Christian faith itself. And in this self-authentication of faith by the spirit in the place of finite consciousness of the infinite significance of Jesus Christ, the divine brings itself forth as absolute spirit. Religious appropriation becomes the self-presentation of God in the subjectivity of faith, which takes place in the community of reflection on the history of the Son of God. “Thus, the congregation itself is the existing spirit, the spirit in its existence, God existing as congregation.”²²

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological understanding of the Church

Looking at Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Sanctorum Communio*,²³ the ecclesiological problem in its constructive form arises from the outset in the dual relationship of human and God to the mediating centre of the Christian community, the person of Jesus Christ. “If we, the members of the Christian church-community, are to believe that in Christ we are reconciled with God, then the mediator of this reconciliation must

20 Cf. Hegel 1995b, 253.

21 Hegel 1995b, 253–254.

22 Hegel 1995b, 254. Cf. Hegel 1993, 74: “Or, to put it more theologically, the Spirit of God is essential in his congregation; God is Spirit only insofar as he is in his congregation”.

23 Bonhoeffer 2015/DBWE I. See Mawson 2018.

represent not only the reconciling divine love, but also at the same time the humanity that is to be reconciled, the humanity of the new Adam.²⁴ The personality of Jesus Christ is the indispensable mediating position for the possibility of a Christian community in God. Its realisation in humanity, which is subject to finite conditions, can only be achieved through the personal appropriation of faith in its living object. Without the ideal relationship of humans' believing subjectivity to the suffering Christ, both the loving care of God and the religious longing of finite existence remain placeless. The heart-turning encounter between God and human in the faith of the individual conscience cannot be actualised unless a synthesis of the two can be realised as religious appropriation in faith through the Holy Spirit. "For the Church, which already is completed in Christ, to build itself up in time, the will of God must be actualised ever anew, now no longer in a fundamental way for all people, but in the personal appropriation of the individual. This is possible only based on God's act in Christ. It also presupposes both being in the church, which is already completed in Christ, and the individual who is brought into the church – that is, into the humanity of Christ – only by act of appropriation."²⁵ In this way, the figure of the mediator of infinite love and finite existence of the sinful "human" before God has a unique significance for the real genesis of the faith of the Christian community. Without Jesus Christ, divine forgiveness and the soul thirsting for redemption must necessarily miss each other. For there would be no synthetic encounter between the two positions, just as there would be no personal appropriation.

However, this Christological centre of the Christian concept of reconciliation can by no means dispense with the subjectivity-logical structure whose implementation in the place of finite subjectivity first transforms it into the place of Christian faith. And so, on the other hand, Bonhoeffer brings the effect of divine mediation in the heart of "human" into play to be able to make the ideal aspect of faith and the appropriation of God's revelation in Christ understandable as a realisation of the same in the world. "To build the church as the community-of-God (*Gemeinde Gottes*) in time, God reveals God's own self as *Holy Spirit*. The *Holy Spirit* is the will of God

24 Bonhoeffer 88/DBWE I 142. Bonhoeffer cites from Ritschl 1882, 546–547.

25 Bonhoeffer 2015, 88/DBWE I 143.

that gathers individuals together to be the church-community, maintains it, and is at work only within it. We experience our election only in the church-community, which is already established in Christ, by personally appropriating it through the Holy Spirit, by standing in the actualised church.”²⁶

Bonhoeffer develops his ecclesiological reflections against the background of this necessary relationship of Christological centre, which needs to be appropriated in the finite subjectivity of faith to finally experience the appropriate unfolding in the action of the Holy Spirit. These, in turn, form the basis of our synthetic conception of a continuation of the speculative philosophy of the Spirit in Bonhoeffer’s definition of the Church. The latter takes its further course following the discussion of the congregation, which is intended to mark the social and religious centre of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer strictly adheres to the Christological centring of further ecclesiological definitions, insofar as the Christian community cannot be understood in any other way than as the realisation of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. “First, we have to inquire into the church-community established in Christ and already completed by God’s act, the community-of-God; [...] we have to inquire into the life-principle of the new basic-relations of social existence.”²⁷

Accordingly, the revelation in Christ is equally accompanied by a transformation of human life, which has been accomplished through the religious appropriation of the person and work of Jesus Christ in the Christian consciousness. In the Christological mediation of a new image of God and his loving heart, a new dimension of self- and world-interpretation opens to the believing mind, which not only had its special reason in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Christian relationship with God is based solely on that encounter, which must once again recreate the hearts of the individual in order to then also realise a new community of hearts in Jesus Christ. In other words, the revelation of God in his only begotten Son creates a new reality of faith, which builds a social form. In this sense, the Christological mediation of faith is nothing other than the ideal genesis of the Christian community. And this, in turn, represents the perfect

26 Bonhoeffer 2015, 89/DBWE I 143.

27 Bonhoeffer 2015, 89/DBWE I 143.

realisation of the eternal reconciliation of God and human. Of course, this has its necessary and sufficient foundation in Christ, and insofar as the foundation is only able to function as such when it sets out to found itself or something, we already have the human realisation of the church before our eyes in the form of Jesus Christ. “These basic relations are already completely established in Christ, not ideally but in reality. Humanity is new in Christ, that is, from the perspective of eternity; but it also becomes new in time.”²⁸

This results in the necessary transgression of the ecclesiological consideration from the Christological foundation of the church to its historical realisation. The Christian mind transcends itself as an individual to recognise itself in others in the community of faith. In this way, the Christian community becomes a concrete synthesis of hearts that desire to surrender themselves to the divine will in faith in reconciliation through Jesus Christ. The social organisation of this will, which wishes to surrender to another will for the sake of the Son who has preceded faith on this path, must, of course, be decided in the divine will itself. Otherwise, the genesis of the church of Jesus Christ can hardly be justified as part of evangelical history itself. “Second, we have to reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit as the will of God for the historical actualisation of the church of Jesus Christ.”²⁹

Consequently, in *Sanctorum Communio*, we are dealing with a form of ecclesiology that essentially owes its Christological mediation to the Holy Spirit. And when Bonhoeffer finally turns to the synthetic or concrete definition of the religious community, he does so in a pneumatological interpretation of the Christian faith, which reveals itself as a continuation or realisation of the effect of Jesus Christ in the respective subjectivity of faith and its specific form of social community. “The Holy Spirit and the Church of Jesus Christ: The Actualisation of the Essential Church”³⁰ is just as impossible without the Christological foundation as its social form of faith or an actual effect of the ideal content of Christianity based on it, as it is to be inaugurated through the preaching of the Gospel. “In and

28 Bonhoeffer 2015, 89/DBWE I 144.

29 Bonhoeffer 2015, 89/DBWE I 144.

30 Bonhoeffer 2015, 100/DBWE I 157.

through Christ, the church is established. [...] Christ did not merely make the church possible but rather realised it for eternity.”³¹ Accordingly, the “community of spirit”³² of the Christian faith essentially results from the intersubjective mediation of the word and history of Jesus Christ, insofar as the characteristic contents and ideas of this community are brought to bear in it. “In the word the Holy Spirit brings to human hearts God’s love, which has been revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ.”³³ And the subjective effect of this encounter of the human heart with the person of Jesus Christ continues through the individual form of Christian consciousness into a larger community of faith, which in this respect is always based on a personal encounter with the Son of Human. The necessary subjectivity of Christian faith becomes itself concrete in the social form of the congregation, and, conversely, Christian intersubjectivity is based on the personal intimacy of the heart with God’s love that has appeared in Christ. The realisation of faith finds its place in the community of the Holy Spirit, which is nothing other than the Christian community or the gathering of hearts in Christ himself. “God’s love wills community.”³⁴

For Bonhoeffer, the special social forms of this community include not only prayer in general, but also mutual intercession in a special sense, insofar as the intersubjective character of Christian faith is realised here without having to renounce the personal moment. Prayer and intercession visualise the Christological foundation of the community for the Christian consciousness to strengthen each other in loving devotion to God. Christian self-awareness is actualised in those forms of piety by proving itself as the realisation of its own content and ideas. Conversely, Bonhoeffer can also look at these operations of the Christian heart from the perspective of the absolute content itself. “If we now look at intercession from God’s standpoint, then it appears as individuals organising themselves to realise the divine will for others, to serve the realisation of God’s rule in the church-community.”³⁵ It is therefore not surprising that individual and

31 Bonhoeffer 2015, 100/DBWE I 157.

32 Bonhoeffer, 2015, 106/DBWE I 165.

33 Bonhoeffer 2015, 106/DBWE I 165.

34 Bonhoeffer 2015, 112/DBWE I 173.

35 Bonhoeffer 2015, 125/DBWE I 188.

collective prayer must play a key role in this consideration of the Christian community. The individual heart becomes aware of the Christological content of the congregation in order to then draw the necessary conclusions regarding its own responsibility for the other members of the Christian community. Insofar as the believing subjectivity sees itself placed in a social community of believers through the image of Jesus Christ, it cannot help but feel connected in the way of Christian agape before God for the hearts that feel the same way. From this arises the original subjectivity of faith, its overarching form of the Christian spirit, which, of course, cannot be understood in any other way than as the intersubjective reality of the divine will or the Holy Spirit. God himself gives himself his objectification in the communion of hearts, which, however, cannot happen without their Christological mediation. God in Christ, Christ in the believers and the same in the community of hearts - this is how the Christian community can be genetically deduced from this perspective. The Christological centre is, as it were, the real or objective centre of the spiritual community of the Christian faith, without whose presence it has no place. And the cultic realisation of the community is, in turn, prayer. "Leading a *single* life, the church must also have and practice one *common* prayer. In this prayer, it takes upon itself the burden of the many individuals who already or still belong to it and carries it to God. In the church, each one bears the other's burden [...]. Thus, when one person intercedes in the name of Christ on behalf of the other, the whole church-community, which actually means 'Christ existing as church-community', to use a modification of the Hegelian concept, participates in that person's prayer."³⁶

In this way, Bonhoeffer admittedly places an independent emphasis on the doctrine of the Christian community, insofar as he emphasises the Christological aspect in contrast to Hegel.³⁷ A Lutheran critique of the transcendental philosophical definition of the human spirit also seems to be at the centre of his reflections, as can be seen from the detailed notes on the relevant passages of *Sanctorum Communio*. Bonhoeffer asserts a necessary correspondence between the Christian subjectivity of faith and its social form in the congregation under "the unity of spirit of the

36 Bonhoeffer 2015, 126/DBWE I 188–189.

37 Concerning Bonhoeffer's reception of Hegel in general see also Robinson 2018.

church-community”³⁸, which, however, does not result from the individual activity of finite consciousness, but rather must be due to divine influence if a Christian congregation is to be constituted in any other way. “As such, it must be a spiritual reality that is more than the sum of all the individuals. Not all the individuals, but the church-community as a whole is in Christ, is the ‘body of Christ’; it is ‘Christ existing as church-community.’”³⁹ These considerations obviously already have the radical criticism of religious consciousness from Feuerbach to Strauss to Nietzsche behind them when shifting their perspective to the side of God, as Karl Barth did in his theological critique of religion. Nevertheless, he uses the conceptual patterns of classical German philosophy to explain his view of the spirit and the Christian community as the real existence of Jesus Christ. “The unity of spirit of the church-community is a fundamental synthesis willed by God; it is not a relation that must be produced, but one that is already established (*iustitia passiva!* [passive righteousness]) and that remains hidden from our eyes.”⁴⁰

For Bonhoeffer, the Christian interweaving of the subjective appropriation of faith in finite consciousness and its necessary connection with the other form of itself in the neighbour, without losing the respective subjectivity in the synthetic unity of the spirit, is not only the actual characteristic of the church. He also sees this as the essential difference between his own ideas and the pneumatological definitions of the transcendental philosophical classics from Kant to Hegel.⁴¹ “[U]nity of spirit, community of spirit, and plurality of spirit are intrinsically linked to each other through their subject matter. [...] Idealist philosophy failed to understand this for reasons that lie at its very heart; here the fundamental lack of a concrete concept of the person becomes evident once again.”⁴² While we can leave

38 Bonhoeffer 2015, 128/DBWE I 192.

39 Bonhoeffer 2015, 127/DBWE I 190.

40 Bonhoeffer 2015, 128/DBWE I 192.

41 See Kroner 1921/1924. Richard Kroner’s opus magnum was a major source for the study of Kant and German Idealism in the 1920s. His approach shaped the image of a linear philosophical development from Kant to Hegel, which has slowly changed in the decades after WW II. Today, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling are mostly conceived as equally classical philosophers rather than mere stepping stones to one another.

42 Bonhoeffer 2015, 129–130/DBWE I 193.

the rather detailed criticism of Schleiermacher's generic understanding of humanity alone here,⁴³ let us take a look at the (indirect) discussion with Hegel.⁴⁴ “Hegel has kept a clear sense for concrete individual life, but he [...] considers it to be merely a form of universal spirit; all individual life is thus destined to be absorbed into the corporate spirit.”⁴⁵

Bonhoeffer sees this flaw in the idealistic philosophy of the spirit essentially in a false systematic connection between finite subjectivity and absolute spirit. Without interpreting the holy spirit itself according to Hegel's understanding, the synthesis of the human spirit for Bonhoeffer is already under the impression of the divine or absolute. For Hegel does not seem to have made a sufficient distinction here, insofar as the absolute in the form of the absolute spirit should be able to realise itself on the ground of finite spirit or consciousness. This results in the necessity of a synthesis of God and man, which threatens to devour the finite person, as it were. The human being is overwhelmed in spirit by the divine without being able to permanently save its own characteristics or the individuality of the person into the eternity of the absolute spirit. The realisation of the absolute in the place of the human subject does not only cost the human subject its finite life. The encounter with the divine becomes the grave of the individual person under the sign of the God-human synthesis of the spirit. “Everywhere we encounter the concept of unity. This is ultimately due to the immanentist concept of God or the identification of human and divine spirit.”⁴⁶

43 See Bonhoeffer 2015, 130 Fn. 68/DBWE I 193 footnote 68.

44 Obviously, Bonhoeffer relies almost entirely on secondary literature and common critique on Hegelianism concerning his understanding of Hegel's philosophy and Classical German Philosophy in general. Besides the discussion of Hegel's formula of “God existing as church-community” in Seeberg 1924–25 (cf. DBWE I 198), Bonhoeffer's main sources for the reconstruction of the history of philosophy, particularly Hegel, actually are Friedrich Brunstad (see Hegel ed. Brunstad 1925) and Emanuel Hirsch (see Hirsch 1921 and Hirsch 1926). Hirsch is constantly quoted regarding Kant and German Idealism without any critical remarks. Furthermore, most of the citations are taken from Hirsch's works. Cf. Bonhoeffer 2015, 130–133/DBWE I 193–199. Regarding the interpretation of German Idealism by Friedrich Brunstad and Emanuel Hirsch see Barth 1992, 355–398, Barth 2008, and Barniske 2016 respectively.

45 Bonhoeffer 2015, 132 Fn. 68/DBWE I 197 footnote 68.

46 Bonhoeffer 2015, 132 Fn. 68/DBWE I 197 footnote 68.

Although Bonhoeffer's reflections on Hegel's philosophy of spirit are largely indebted to contemporary research by Neo-Idealism and in line with common criticism, they help to understand the genesis of his appropriation of Hegel's concept of the congregation. This takes place as a criticism of the philosophy of spirit to add Christological weight. Bonhoeffer sees a synthesis of finite and absolute spirit prevailing here, threatening to make the human moment in the divine unity of the spirit disappear. "This basic tendency clearly emerges in Hegel's concept of the Christian church community. Once the human spirit had become aware in Christ of its identity with the divine Spirit, and through the death of death itself finitude had been destroyed, what has become manifest in Christ must now be realised effectively in the church."⁴⁷

The synthesis of absolute spirit goes beyond the essential appropriation of evangelical history, when Jesus Christ no longer remains staged as the actual head of the church, but merely serves to visualise absolute self-consciousness in the place of the human spirit. Thus, Hegel does not do justice to the actual status of the Christian community as well as the person of Jesus Christ, even though Bonhoeffer can gain something from the idea of the real existence of faith in the Christian community. The critical moment in the reinterpretation of Hegel's ecclesiological formula lies in the lack of emphasis on the personality of Christ and the individual subjectivity of believers. "God existing as community" (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* 3:331) brings the 'many individuals back into the unity of the spirit, into the community,' and lives in the community as 'the actual, universal self-consciousness' (*ibid.* 3:133). [...] [I]t seems certain, I think, that Hegel simply identifies the Holy Spirit with the corporate spirit of the church."⁴⁸

In contrast, Bonhoeffer himself holds the idea of a Christological mediation of the Christian spirit in play, which can give the person of Jesus Christ a lasting significance for the equally personal faith of Christian subjectivity and their synthesis in the congregation. God cannot exist in the church in any other way than through the person of the incarnate Logos. The same is the actual existence of God for and in the believers, insofar as the Christian

47 Bonhoeffer 2015, 132–133 Fn. 68/DBWE I 197–198 footnote 68.

48 Bonhoeffer 2015, 133 Fn. 68/DBWE I 198 footnote 68.

spirit can only be realised by way of the individual appropriation and intersubjective communication of the gospel. “The unity of the Christian church is *not based on human unanimity of spirit*, but on *divine unity of Spirit*, and the two are not identical from the outset.”⁴⁹ This is not only a reminder of the importance of the divine will for the genesis and continued existence of the Christian community. Bonhoeffer also inscribes a Christian meaning into the concept of synthesis regarding our communion with God. “*The personal unity of the church (Kirche) is ‘Christ existing as church-community (Gemeinde)’*; Paul could also speak of Christ himself being the church.”⁵⁰

4. Conclusion

A look at the ecclesiological reflections of Hegel and Bonhoeffer has produced a multifaceted picture. On the one hand, Hegel’s treatment of Christianity revealed an extraordinary speculative power that could ascribe outstanding significance to the church as the actual existence of God as spirit. On the other hand, the fact that the role of Christ threatens to shrink to an (essential) moment of passage in God’s self-emergence as the church has proved to be a decisive motivation for Bonhoeffer’s own ecclesiology. By reinterpreting Hegel’s formula into the church as the existence of Christ, Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology carries out a twofold relation. For one thing, he recalibrates the position of Christ within the idealistic definition of the church by placing him back at its centre. Second, he adopts Hegel’s philosophy of spirit insofar as he constructively takes up his formula to raise it to a new level through his Christological recalibration – a classic case of sublation in Hegel’s sense. In this way, Bonhoeffer represents a strong ecclesiological variant in the critical yet productive reception of German Idealism in 20th-century theology. On this basis, he was later to build his ethics of Christian discipleship, the living presence of Christ, manifesting in the active charity of his Church.

49 Bonhoeffer 2015, 132–133/DBWE I 198.

50 Bonhoeffer 2015, 133/DBWE I 199. See also Bonhoeffer 2015, 127.128.134/DBWE I 190.191.200.

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