The Absolute Paradox: Kierkegaard's Argument against Hegel's Account of the Relation of Faith to Philosophy[1]

David James

Introduction

The assumption that Kierkegaard is highly critical of Hegel's philosophy has recently been rigorously examined and the argument made that a number of criticisms, which appear to be directed at Hegel, are, in fact, aimed at his Danish followers.[2] In what follows, I intend to argue that Kierkegaard must nevertheless be seen as a critic of Hegel's own thought when it comes to the specific issue of the relation of faith to philosophy, because even if Hegel's Danish followers form the direct target of Kierkegaard's criticisms of speculative thought, these criticisms can still be directed against Hegel's own account of the relation of faith to philosophy. I intend to show, in fact, that Kierkegaard not only demonstrates a clear awareness of what is involved in Hegel's attempt to comprehend Christianity in terms that may be regarded as other than those in which faith understands itself, but also provides, on behalf of faith, a cogent attack on Hegel's philosophy of religion, in so far as the aim of the latter is to comprehend the content of faith in purely conceptual terms. This does not, of course, mean that the main impetus for Kierkegaard's criticisms of speculative thought's relation to faith did not come from one or more of Hegel's Danish followers: for it may well be that in this particular case Hegel's Danish followers were reliable interpreters of his thought, so that by criticising them Kierkegaard perforce ends up attacking Hegel's own position on the issue of the relation of faith to philosophy.

In order to demonstrate that Kierkegaard is able to provide some relevant criticisms of Hegel's philosophy of religion, I shall begin by outlining Hegel's own concept of faith. I shall then go on to state why Hegel thinks that philosophy needs to go beyond the standpoint of faith and how it does so. Next, I shall introduce Kierkegaard's distinction between religiousness

A and religiousness B, together with his claim that the latter form of religiousness is, in virtue of the absolute paradox of the Incarnation which defines it, incompatible with the type of objective attitude that he associates with speculative thought.[3] Finally, I shall argue that the absolute paradox remains a highly problematic idea in the case of Hegel's philosophy of religion because David Friedrich Strauss' reduction of the life of Jesus to the status of myth is an implication of Hegel's own position, just as Strauss thought it was. Kierkegaard's account of the absolute paradox of the Incarnation will therefore be seen not only to provide an argument against Hegel's account of the relation of faith to philosophy, but also to support a left-Hegelian interpretation of his philosophy of religion. I here have in mind the fact that it was Hegel's views concerning the person and story of Christ that, according to Strauss, led the Hegel school to split into three distinct groups; a division that Strauss explains in terms of the three possible ways of answering the question whether and to what extent the gospel story of Jesus is proven to be history by Hegel's idea of the unity of the divine and human natures. The three possible ways of answering this question are as follows: either the entire gospel (right Hegelianism), or merely part of it (the centre), or neither the whole or part of it (left Hegelianism) is to be confirmed as historical by the idea of the divine-human unity.[4] As we shall see, a comparison of Kierkegaard's account of the absolute paradox with Hegel's understanding of the relation of the idea of the God-man to philosophical thought suggests that the left-Hegelian answer to this question is the one that is closest to Hegel's own position.

Hegel's Concept of Faith and Kierkegaard's Religiousness B

Hegel states his own concept of faith in the following passage:

> ... I understand by faith neither the merely subjective state of belief which is restricted to the form of certainty, leaving untouched the nature of the content, if any, of the belief, nor on the other hand only the *credo*, the church's confession of faith which can be recited and learnt by rote without communicating itself to man's innermost self, without being identified with the certainty which a man has of himself, with his consciousness of himself. I hold that faith, in the true, ancient sense of the word, is a unity of both these moments, including the one no less than the other.[5]

In this passage Hegel clearly identifies two moments of faith, which he

holds to be equally essential: the individual's state of being personally convinced that he is a witness to religious truth and religious doctrine, which possesses an authority that makes it independent of the particular feelings, opinions and personal convictions of the individual believer who holds it to be true. In other words, Hegel's concept of faith contains within itself two different senses of the word faith, since he refers to both the subjective state of feeling convinced that the object of one's faith is the truth and *the* faith, that is, a determinate body of religious teachings which is held to possess an absolute authority in relation to the individual believer for whom these teachings form the content of faith. This means that Hegel's concept of faith, in so far as its subjective moment is concerned, is compatible with the kind of subjectivist standpoint concerning the question of the essence of religious faith of which Kierkegaard is one of the most famous representatives. Yet by treating the objective moment of faith as equally essential, Hegel also seeks to do justice to the fact that the teachings of Christianity are held to possess an authority that makes them independent of the individual believer's personal convictions or opinions, so that these teachings form a content that "is not merely something subjective but is also an absolute, objective content that is in and for itself, and has the characteristic of truth".[6] By stressing the unity of the two moments of faith in the way that he does, Hegel shows that he wants to unify the inwardness of faith with the kind of objective content that he believes is to be found in religious doctrine, as opposed to his wanting to privilege one moment of faith in relation to the other one. This unity is possible, Hegel believes, because once the objective moment of faith has communicated itself to the individual's own innermost self, as it must do if the subjective moment of faith is also to be present, the individual believer will hold this content to be true in virtue of the fact that it has been validated by his own inner conviction of its truth, rather than its resting on a purely external type of authority.

In spite of the unification of the two moments of Hegel's concept of faith that is achieved at the level of faith itself, Hegel thinks that, in the case of the Christian religion, it is also necessary to establish the possibility of reconciling faith with reason by demonstrating that the content of faith and the content of philosophy are identical; and this requires going beyond the standpoint of faith altogether. Hegel's attempt to establish this identity of content is motivated by the idea that the content of the Christian religion can and must be shown to be rational. The need to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian religion is for Hegel due to the demand for rational insight that he thinks is characteristic of a post-Enlightenment age, in

which the highest right of the subject is to recognize nothing that I do not perceive as rational.[7] This demand for rational insight requires going beyond the standpoint of religion itself because the form in which the absolute content is present for the religious consciousness is an inadequate one. The form in question is that of representational thought [*Vorstellung*], and I shall state what some of its main limitations are later. For present purposes, it is enough to say that for Hegel the inadequacies of this form of knowledge can only be overcome by philosophy, which involves a purely conceptual knowledge of the same content that forms the object of Christian faith. The task that Hegel thus sets himself is summarized in the following passage:

> God has revealed himself through the Christian religion; that is, he has granted mankind the possibility of recognising what he is, so that he is no longer an impenetrable mystery. The fact that knowledge of God is possible also makes it our duty to know him, and that development of the thinking spirit which proceeds from this foundation, the revelation of the divine being, must eventually produce a situation in which all that was at first present to spirit in feeling and representation [*dem fühlenden und vorstellenden Geiste*] can also be comprehended by thought.[8]

In other words, God has revealed himself through the Christian religion but in an inadequate way; for, on the one hand, the nature of God has been revealed through religious doctrine, which, for Hegel, belongs to the realm of representational thought, in which the rationality of the content is to some extent obscured; while, on the other hand, the content of religion is validated not by reason but by a subjective state of the individual believer, namely, a feeling of religious conviction. As a result of these limitations of the Christian revelation of God, the task remains of comprehending the content of faith, which has thus far appeared in the form of feeling and representational thought, in terms of thought alone, that is, in purely conceptual terms.

The task that Hegel sets himself could, however, already be cited as evidence of an essentially ambiguous relation to the Christian religion, since he appears to want to offer a philosophical justification of religion through a critique of its representational form of thought.[9] Nevertheless, Hegel thinks that this task must be performed in order to satisfy the spirit of the age, which, he claims, "has developed to a stage where thinking and the way of looking at things which goes together with thinking, has become for

consciousness an imperative condition of what it shall admit and recognize as true."[10] Moreover, Hegel views Protestantism as an earlier manifestation of this demand for rational insight, as is evident from the following passage:

> It is a great obstinacy, the kind of obstinacy which does honour to human beings, that they are unwilling to acknowledge in their attitudes anything which has not been justified by thought – and this obstinacy is the characteristic property of the modern age, as well as being the distinctive principle of Protestantism. What Luther inaugurated as faith in feeling and in the testimony of the spirit is the same thing that the spirit, at a more mature stage of its development, endeavours to grasp in the *concept* so as to free itself in the present and thus find itself therein.[11]

From what has been said so far, it is clear that while Hegel does not consider faith and philosophy to be identical forms of knowledge, and thus allows that they may be viewed in isolation from each other, he thinks that their implicit identity can and must be demonstrated in the case of the Christian religion.[12] In stark contrast, Kierkegaard uses the idea of the absolute paradox to show that faith in feeling and the type of conceptual knowledge that characterizes speculative philosophy must be seen as radically different from each other because the identity of their content cannot be shown; and it is therefore time to look at his account of the absolute paradox and his attitude to speculative thought.

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard treats "the speculative point of view" as an example of the objective type of reasoning which he thinks is incompatible with genuine religious faith, especially Christian faith. He claims that the objective issue is the truth of Christianity, while the subjective issue concerns the individual's relation to Christianity (*KW* 12.1, 17; *SV1* 7, 8), and this brings to mind Hegel's account of the two moments of faith. Kierkegaard also states that the speculative point of view conceives Christianity as an historical phenomenon, so that the question of the truth of Christianity becomes "a matter of permeating it with thought in such a way that finally Christianity itself is the eternal thought" (*KW* 12.1, 50; *SV1* 7, 37). This is again, broadly speaking, an accurate description of Hegel's view of the matter: for by comprehending Christian doctrine in purely conceptual terms, Hegel thinks he can show that this historical religion reveals the same truth which philosophy makes fully explicit. It is, however, strictly speaking, only one doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity, which for Hegel makes Christianity into a religion that is higher than all

other historical religions, since he thinks that he is able to show how this doctrine, which is peculiar to Christianity, exhibits the moments of the logical concept (i.e. universality, particularity, and individuality) and corresponds to the highest stage of rational thought, the absolute idea.[13] The latter is the logical idea (i.e. the unity of thought and being as established in Hegel's *Logic*) within itself and its objectification in the philosophies of nature and spirit, which, together with his *Logic*, make up Hegel's philosophical system. As we shall see below, in the case of one essential moment of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Incarnation, Kierkegaard argues against the idea that speculative thought has the capacity to comprehend the content of faith.

For Kierkegaard the Incarnation decisively distinguishes Christianity from all other historical religions, and thus provides the basis for the distinction that he makes between religiousness A and religiousness B. While the former type of religiousness concerns the individual's infinite interest in his eternal happiness, Kierkegaard points out that this is not a specifically Christian form of religiousness (*KW* 12.1, 555; *SV1* 7, 484-485). For in religiousness A the eternal is in its omnipresence both everywhere and nowhere (*KW* 12.1, 571; *SV1* 7, 498); and this type of religiousness can therefore also be present in paganism (*KW* 12.1, 557; *SV1* 7, 486). While Kierkegaard associates religiousness A with immanence, religiousness B in his view constitutes a decisive break with immanence because for it the eternal is present at a specific moment in time (*KW* 12.1, 571; *SV1* 7, 498). This is because the object of faith for this type of religiousness is the absolute paradox as expressed in the thesis that "God has existed in human form, was born, grew up etc." (*KW* 12.1, 217; *SV1* 7, 182). In other words, in the Christian religion, the Incarnation qualifies the eternal happiness which forms the object of the individual's infinite interest, since faith in Christ is the condition of eternal happiness.

Unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard goes out of his way to argue that, in virtue of its essentially paradoxical nature, the doctrine of the Incarnation can never be shown to be rational. He claims that the Incarnation presents us with an absolute paradox because although the eternal is by its nature unhistorical, it must nevertheless be thought to become historical once the god comes into existence as an individual human being at a specific moment in time. In the case of the Incarnation the historical is therefore "not something historical in the ordinary sense but the historical that has been able to become historical only against its nature" (*KW* 12.1, 578; *SV1* 7, 504)'. In other words, the eternal is essentially unhistorical in the sense

that it is not subject to the conditions which temporality imposes on finite things; and yet, in complete opposition to our understanding of the essential nature of the eternal, it becomes, through the Incarnation, subject to these very same conditions.

Kierkegaard is thus led to describe the Incarnation as "a break with all thinking" (*KW* 12.1, 579; *SV1* 7, 505), so that the only possible way of understanding the absolute paradox is to understand that it cannot be understood (*KW* 12.1, 218; *SV1* 7, 183). Consequently, the absolute paradox presents any individual who seeks to base his eternal happiness on it with a stark choice: either to reject it altogether on account of the offence that it causes the human understanding, or to believe and thereby endure what Kierkegaard calls the "crucifixion of the understanding" (*KW* 12.1, 564; *SV1* 7, 492). Yet for the individual who makes the latter choice, the matter does not end there: for in order to maintain the right God-relation, he must continually renounce his understanding in the face of the absolute paradox; and Kierkegaard is therefore led to describe faith as "the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness" (*KW* 12.1, 611; *SV1* 7, 532).

Kierkegaard's account of religiousness B shows that there is for him at least one central feature of the Christian religion which cannot be comprehended by human reason because it is, in the eyes of reason, simply absurd. Consequently, a speculative explanation of the paradox cannot be an explanation in the proper sense of the term but is instead a correction; for whereas an explanation serves to make clear what something is but does not remove the thing in question, speculative thought removes the paradox by showing that there is no paradox (*KW* 12.1, 218-220; *SV1* 7, 183-184). This criticism could be interpreted as the claim that speculative thought does not do justice to the absolute paradox of the Incarnation because it maintains that the paradox can in fact be removed by gaining rational insight into its true nature; a position that can be attributed to Hegel because he attempts to remove the paradox of the Incarnation by comprehending its opposed determinations (i.e. the divine and the human, or the infinite and the finite) as parts of a higher unity. While the fact that he thinks an effort must be made to resolve the paradox of the Incarnation suggests that Hegel takes the paradox seriously, I shall argue below that he can in fact be seen to play down its essentially paradoxical nature, thus failing to do justice to that which, for Kierkegaard, most decisively distinguishes Christianity from all other historical religions.

In order to understand how Hegel attempts to comprehend the Incar-

nation in speculative terms, we first need to return to the distinction that he makes between representational thought and pure thought, and then look at how this distinction relates to what he has to say about the person and story of Christ. We shall see that what Hegel has to say about the latter invites both David Friedrich Strauss' reduction of the life of Jesus to the status of myth and the criticism that Hegel is only able to comprehend the Incarnation in purely speculative terms by playing down its essentially paradoxical character.

Hegel, Strauss and the Idea of the God-Man

When compared to philosophical knowledge, religious representational thought in Hegel's view suffers from a number of limitations, two of which are of particular relevance to us. To begin with, religious representational thought is inferior to pure thought because it employs what can generally be termed images [*Bilder*], which are drawn from immediate intuition but have an "inner" meaning, and thus an allegorical or symbolic function.[14] For instance, the representation that God has begotten a son is a metaphor drawn from a relationship that is familiar to the natural (i.e. non philosophical) consciousness; and even though this representation corresponds to a speculative truth that is made explicit by philosophy, the use of images nevertheless prevents God from being comprehended as he is in himself. Pure thought, by contrast, deals directly with that of which such images serve as metaphors or symbols. Secondly, religious representational thought presents the eternal truth in a historical shape; and it thus contains two conflicting elements: the eternal and the finite. For instance, according to Hegel, the story of Jesus is something "two-fold" because it not only contains an "outward history [*äußerliche Geschichte*]", which is only "the ordinary story [*gewöhnliche Geschichte*] of a human being", but also has the divine as its content; yet it is only this divine element that forms "the inward, the genuine, the substantial dimension" of this story and "the object of reason".[15] In contrast, Kierkegaard's idea of the absolute paradox implies that the "ordinary story" of the historical Christ, which concerns the human dimension to Christ's nature, is just as integral to Christianity as his divinity.

The person of Christ can therefore be seen as one of the images that Hegel thinks religious representational thought employs. In the person of Christ, the divine truth is, moreover, presented in an historical form because Christ is represented as being a concrete individual who was born

in a certain place and at a certain time, who performed certain acts and
eventually died on the cross, even though he is also thought to be divine,
since, as Hegel himself points out, what is of significance for faith is not
only the historical Jesus, but also his status as the Son of God.[16] The story
of Christ thus contains the two conflicting elements mentioned above: the
eternal and the finite. However, while this leads Kierkegaard to stress the
impossibility of comprehending Christ's dual nature, Hegel's account of the
limitations of religious representational thought implies that for him it is
only Jesus' status as the Son of God, that is, his divinity, which matters.

Hegel nevertheless seems to appreciate the fact that the unity of the
human and the divine, as represented in the person of Christ, presents a
problem for the human understanding when he describes the idea of the
God-man [*der Gottmensch*], which expresses this unity, as a "monstrous
compound" that directly contradicts both representational thought and the
understanding.[17] In the latter case, Hegel can be seen to have in mind the
kind of Enlightenment indignation regarding this idea that we find in a fig-
ure of the French Enlightenment such as d'Holbach, who describes it as
being full of "absurd ideas [*notions absurdes*]" borrowed from the Egyptians,
Indians and Greeks, whose ridiculous mythologies assume the existence of
gods invested with a human form who are subject to the same weaknesses
as men.[18] According to Hegel, such a paradox can be resolved, however, so
that the decision to believe or to be offended, which Kierkegaard thinks is
essential to faith, need not to be seen as an absolute one: for speculative
thought is able to show that no offence is involved in the idea of the unity
of the human and divine natures, or the finite and the infinite, which the
God-man represents. The absolute choice between being offended and
having faith with which Kierkegaard presents us is, in short, simply a con-
sequence of the limitations of religious representational thought, as Hegel
himself implies when he claims that a speculative content cannot be pre-
sented in the form of images and representations without contradiction.[19]
The absolute paradox is, moreover, a problem for reason itself only in so far
as the latter has not attained the level of speculative thought.

While Hegel appears to acknowledge the essentially paradoxical nature
of the Incarnation, there are nevertheless good reasons for claiming that he
removes the paradox of the Incarnation only by downplaying that aspect of
it to which Kierkegaard seeks to draw attention, namely, the historical
aspect that derives from the human dimension to Christ's nature. As we
have seen, Hegel's account of the limitations of representational thought
appears to treat the historical aspect of the Incarnation as a limitation of

representational thought, since he stipulates that religious representational thought is defective because it presents the eternal truth in an historical form, whereas this "outward history" (i.e. the life of the historical Jesus) is not the proper object of reason. To be fair to Hegel, this claim is one that he makes from the standpoint of a philosophy of religion which has already comprehended the content of Christian faith in purely conceptual terms. I shall later argue, however, that this defence of his position gives rise to problems of its own.

Since the belief that there once existed an historical figure called Jesus who really was the Son of God is arguably central to Christianity, and thus forms an integral part of the content of this historical religion, it could be argued that the belief in question cannot be so easily dismissed as a limitation of representational thought without bringing into question the truth of this historical religion. In this respect, while it is true to say that the critical dimension to Hegel's account of religious representational thought can prevent a too literal reading of a religious representation and thus lead to a better understanding of its significance,[20] any attempt to dismiss the representation of Christ as a historical individual on the grounds that it belongs to a too literal reading of the representation of the God-man could be said to run counter to the beliefs of the natural religious consciousness. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, reminds us of the human and historical dimension to the divine-human unity which finds expression in the idea of the God-man. We might also point out that any attempt to downplay this aspect of the Incarnation would fail to do justice to Enlightenment indignation at such a teaching, whereas Kierkegaard accepts that such indignation is fully justified.

In order to illustrate just why Hegel might be accused of weakening the paradox of the Incarnation so as to be in a position to comprehend it, and to point out some of the implications of his position regarding the person and life of Christ, I now intend to show that Hegel invites some of the main ideas put forward by David Friedrich Strauss in his *Life of Jesus*. It could, in fact, be argued that Strauss is, in this work, more aware than Hegel himself of the implications of his account of the limitations of religious representational thought, or is less cautious about stating what they are. Moreover, Strauss saw his own rejection of the historical content of the life of Jesus, together with his claim that such a rejection does not affect the truth of Christianity, as having their source in Hegel's philosophy, especially his distinction between representational thought [*Vorstellung*] and concept [*Begriff*], which for Strauss raised the possibility of bringing respect for bib-

lical documents and church dogmas into harmony with the freedom of thought.[21]

One point on which Hegel and Strauss are clearly in agreement concerns the way in which Strauss claims there has been an advance in human thought and culture that has resulted in an increasing tension between what a people has generally come to accept as adequate evidence or marks of truth and the writings on which its religion is based. [22] For even though Hegel does not speak of a tension between human thought and religion, we have seen that he clearly holds the view that there has been an advance in human culture which has led to a change in what people should be prepared to accept as the mark of religious truth. Strauss also thinks that his mythical account of the life of Jesus does not mean that the latter is devoid of all truth; he claims instead that the core beliefs of the Christian religion are independent of his critical investigations and that the events of the life of Jesus, such as his supernatural birth and his resurrection, remain eternal truths, however much their actuality as historical facts may be doubted.[23] Strauss thus downplays the importance of the historical facts of Jesus' life, just as Hegel does, while his claim that this life contains eternal truths, even though it belongs to the realm of myth, also accords with Hegel's philosophy of religion; for, as we have seen, Hegel makes a distinction between the external (i.e. merely historical) aspects of the story of Jesus and its inner truth on the grounds that religious representational thought consists of images that point beyond themselves to a deeper truth. Moreover, when Strauss identifies what he takes this inner truth to be, his indebtedness to Hegel becomes even more evident, as we shall now see.

In relation to the idea of the God-man, Strauss argues that the predicates which the Church ascribes to a single individual, that is, the two natures, the finite and the infinite, or the human and the divine, are only in harmony with each other in the idea of the human race, whereas they contradict each other when predicated of Christ, who is a single individual.[24] We may here leave aside the question as to whether Strauss is really justified in claiming that the two natures are in harmony with each other in the idea of the human race, even though this move appears to suppress one of the terms of the paradox of the Incarnation (i.e. the divine aspect of Christ's nature). In the present context, what is significant about Strauss' position is that, when its various elements are taken together as a whole, it must be seen to correspond to Hegel's own position. For a start, Strauss' description of the contradiction found in the person of Christ fits Hegel's description of the God-man as a 'monstrous compound'. Admittedly, Hegel does not

claim that the unity of the finite and the infinite is only to be found in the idea of the human race. Nevertheless, both Hegel and Strauss hold the view that the contradiction found in the person of Christ is expressive of a deeper truth, which for Strauss is the unity of the two natures in the human race as a whole, whereas for Hegel it is the unity of thought and being, and the infinite and the finite, that is demonstrated by speculative philosophy. Finally, Strauss understands the person Christ, whose truth is humanity as a whole, to be a representation, or myth, as he himself would put it, with no basis in historical fact. The person and life of Christ are therefore products of the collective religious consciousness; the result of an attempt on the part of the latter to make its own essence (i.e. its humanity) into the object of its consciousness. This accords with the way in which Hegel considers the historical dimension to the person and story of Christ to belong to the limitations of religious representational thought; while for him the collective religious consciousness tries to make the essential nature of reality, which is made fully explicit only by philosophy, into the object of its consciousness.[25] In short, both Hegel and Strauss attribute what is historical to the form in which the doctrine of the Incarnation is present to human consciousness, rather than viewing it as belonging to the content of this doctrine; and it is therefore difficult not to think of Strauss' reduction of the life of the historical Jesus to the status of myth as being in harmony with Hegel's philosophy of religion, just as Strauss himself thought it was.

There is, however, an important difference between Hegel's and Strauss' accounts of the Incarnation, which relates to a criticism that Kierkegaard appears to aim at Strauss, and to which I have already alluded: the criticism that this understanding of the God-man ignores the infinite qualitative difference that exists between God and man (*KW* 19, 126; *SV1* 11, 235).[26] In other words, Strauss overcomes the paradox of the Incarnation by reducing the two natures to that of the human and finite, thereby ignoring altogether Christ's divinity. Hegel, by contrast, thinks that although religious representations contain images drawn from the finite world, they nevertheless seek to convey a meaning that cannot be exhausted by the finite alone, and thus contain a tension between the sensible and the supersensible.[27] Yet even if Hegel in this way preserves the divine aspect of the divine-human unity of the Incarnation, he appears to suppress its human aspect, that is, the life of Jesus considered as a series of historical events; and one may therefore ask what is left of the finite dimension to the doctrine of the Incarnation once it has been comprehended in purely conceptual terms. In short, while Hegel appears, like Strauss, to reject the belief that there was once an his-

torical figure called Jesus who really was the Son of God, he attempts to maintain the truth of this teaching by suppressing the human or finite aspect of the absolute paradox of the Incarnation, whereas Strauss suppresses its other term, that is, the divine or infinite aspect. The view that Hegel rejected the idea that there was once an historical figure called Jesus who really was the Son of God has, however, been questioned by Michael Theunissen, who seeks to refute Strauss' claim that he was merely following the lead given by Hegel's philosophy of religion.

Theunissen tries to show that for Hegel the historical event of the Incarnation is equally as necessary as the revelation of God in finite spirit (i.e. humanity as a whole), so that rather than adding something to this absolute content, the religious consciousness is directed by the content itself to represent absolute spirit in the shape of a particular historical person.[28] To support his interpretation of Hegel's position, Theunissen suggests two reasons Hegel has for viewing the Incarnation as an actual historical event. The first reason he gives is that the specifically Christian form of representational thought is defined by its relation to its peculiar object, which is the actuality of the historical fact in question, so that the latter must be presupposed in all its givenness and cannot, therefore, be held to be a mere representation or fiction.[29] While it is certainly true that the Incarnation forms the object of the Christian form of representational thought, in so far as it is an essential element in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, through which God's true nature is, for Hegel, first revealed to humanity, I shall argue below that this need not imply its actuality as an historical event. The second reason that Theunissen gives is that the dialectic of the self-externalization of absolute spirit requires a radical opposition, and, since absolute spirit at first finds itself in the element of eternity and abstract universality, the opposition in question must involve temporality and the contingent facticity of the particular.[30] On the basis of this systematic requirement, Theunissen rejects Strauss' position, which is that God reveals himself in humanity as a whole and the totality of human history, but not in a single human being; and he argues instead that for Hegel both forms of revelation are compatible with each other.[31]

With respect to the first claim, the objection can be made that even if the specifically Christian form of representational thought is defined by its relation to a particular historical event (i.e. the Incarnation), Hegel's account of representational thought does not warrant the further claim that the givenness of this historical event must be presupposed. As we have seen, Hegel describes the use of images as being one of the main features of reli-

gious representational thought; and it is clearly possible for an image to form the object of one's consciousness without this object being the image of something that exists, or once existed, in the external world; hence the compatibility of Hegel's position with Strauss' reduction of the life of Jesus to the status of myth. This compatibility, as previously mentioned, rests on the fact that Hegel's account of the limitations of religious representational thought already implies that the historical dimension to the story of Jesus' life belongs to the form rather than the content of the revealed religion. This also serves to undermine the idea, which Theunissen may have had in mind, that there must have once existed an object in the sensible world corresponding to the religious representation of this same object (i.e. the person of the historical Jesus) which now forms the object of Christian faith in the medium of representational thought, because otherwise the representation in question would never have entered human consciousness.[32] Moreover, by stressing the givenness of the historical fact of God's becoming man and thus taking on a sensible form, Theunissen appears to collapse the distinction between objects of representational thought and objects of sense certainty, which for Hegel belong to completely different spheres of human knowledge, even though he criticizes Strauss for doing the same thing.[33]

Although Hegel's account of religious representational thought cannot be used to show that the Christian representation of the God-man presupposes the historical fact of the Incarnation, there remains Theunissen's claim that the dialectic of the self-externalization of absolute spirit demands a radical opposition of the kind found in the transition from the element of eternity and abstract universality to a single historical event and a single human being. If, for the sake of argument, we grant that such a radical opposition is indeed a requirement of Hegel's system, and that it implies, moreover, the revelation of God in a single human being, the question arises as to why the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth must be the one to fulfil this demand.[34] In any case, it could be argued that for Hegel the task of speculative philosophy is simply to demonstrate the necessity of the divine-human unity, whereas the task of demonstrating in which individual this unity becomes actual must remain a matter of historical enquiry.[35]

Finally, we may question the validity of any appeal to a requirement of Hegel's system; for even in the case of the more modest idea that the aim of speculative philosophy is to demonstrate the necessity of the divine-human unity, but not to demonstrate in which individual this unity

becomes actual, the ultimate justification of this systematic requirement must be seen to lie in the dialectical process through which it is generated. In short, the idea that the task of speculative thought is to demonstrate the necessity of the divine-human unity invites the question as to whether it has the capacity to perform this task; and the only way of answering this question would be to critically examine the dialectical process through which Hegel thinks he is able to demonstrate the necessity of the divine-human unity. The possibility remains, however, that the dialectical process through which the necessity of the divine-human unity, or any other requirement of Hegel's system, is generated may turn out on closer inspection not to be as necessary as Hegel thinks it is. In other words, even if Hegel himself believed that the dialectical progression through which the various determinations of his philosophical system are generated is a genuinely necessary one, the question as to whether he really succeeds in exhibiting the necessity of this dialectical process still needs to be answered.

This problem brings to mind the type of situation which Kierkegaard describes in relation to a critical-historical enquiry into the authenticity of particular books of the Bible. Kierkegaard points to a problem which centres on the idea that objective reasoning is at best only able to demonstrate that something is highly probable, but not that it is absolutely certain, so that the possibility of error, however small, always remains. Kierkegaard relates this problem to Christianity understood as a historical document and, more specifically, to the question as to which books of the Bible are to be regarded as authoritative, which itself raises concerns about the canonicity, authenticity and integrity of the particular books of the Bible (*KW* 12.1, 24; *SV1* 7, 14).

Even though this problem does not appear to arise in connection with Hegel's understanding of the relation of faith to philosophy because he rejects the idea of basing the truth of Christianity on anything historical, the possibility of doubt could nevertheless be seen to apply to his attempt to exhibit the necessity, and hence also the possibility, of the divine-human unity as represented by the idea of the God-man. This is because one would, in effect, be faced with essentially the same problem as the person who looks to the critical-historical mode of enquiry to secure his faith. For just as the attempt to establish the historical accuracy or authenticity of something always involves the possibility of error, it is always possible that a critical examination of the stages in the dialectical progression through which the determinations and requirements of Hegel's system are generated might show that certain stages in this dialectical progression are not, in

fact, necessary. In this respect, Hegel's attempt to remove the possibility of offence, which the absolute paradox of the Incarnation presents to human reason, might itself be thought to rest on faith in the truth of his philosophical system.

In the light of what has been said above, I believe that the stress that Kierkegaard lays on the paradox of the Incarnation, when compared with Hegel's account of the limitations of religious representational thought, suggests that Hegel's attempt to comprehend the content of Christian faith in purely conceptual terms radically alters this content. This is because Hegel suppresses one of the terms of the paradox by identifying the historical dimension to the person and story of Christ as being a limitation of religious representational thought. Instead of offering an explanation of the paradox, that is, an account of what it essentially is, speculative thought therefore appears to offer a correction of it, just as Kierkegaard claims it does. Hegel would, however, surely argue that Kierkegaard's position ignores the demands of a post-Enlightenment age, which make the task of demonstrating the compatibility of the teachings of Christianity with human reason into one that a Christian philosopher must undertake. This invites the question as to whether philosophy is really in a position to perform this task without in some way perverting the content of faith; and the emphasis that Kierkegaard places on the absolute paradox of the Incarnation may well lead us to doubt that it is, as long as one wants to maintain that there once existed an historical figure called Jesus of Nazareth who really was the Son of God. Consequently, irrespective of the question as to the actual source of Kierkegaard's understanding of the attempt made by speculative thought to comprehend faith, his criticisms of it may be seen to apply equally as much to Hegel as to his Danish followers. As far as the issue of the relation of faith to philosophy is concerned, the judgement that there is "an absolute opposition between the viewpoints of Hegel and Kierkegaard on the relation between philosophy and Christianity" should therefore be considered to be an essentially correct one.[36]

Notes

1. The author would like to thank the University of Ottawa for the award of a postdoctoral fellow-ship during which this article was written.

2. See Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. The Danish Hegelians in question are Hans Lassen Martensen (1808-1884), Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860) and Rasmus Nielsen (1809-1884).

3. For Hegel speculative thought [*das Spekulative*] consists in the grasping of opposites in their unity. Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, in *Werke. Theorie-Werkausgabe*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 5, p. 52. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, p. 56.

4. Cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *Streitschriften zur Verteidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu, und zur Charakteristik der gegenwärtigen Theologie*, Drittes Heft, Tübingen: Osiander, 1837, p. 95. *In Defense of my 'Life of Jesus' against the Hegelians*, trans. Marilyn Chapin Massey, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1983, p. 38.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorrede zu Hinrichs' Religionsphilosophie* (1822), in *Werke* 11, p. 43. *Religion and Reli-gious Truth: Hegel's Foreword to H. Fr. W. Hinrichs' Die Religion im inneren Verhältnisse zur Wissenschaft* (1822), trans. A.V. Miller, in *Beyond Epistemology: New Studies in the Philosophy of Hegel*, ed. Freder-ick G.Weiss, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, p. 228. I have slightly modified the translation.

6. G.W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 1: *Einleitung. Der Begriff der Religion*, ed.Wal-ter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993), p. 25. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Volume I: Introduc-tion and the Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley, Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1984).The English translation contains the pagination of the German edition.

7. Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, in *Werke* 7, § 132, *Anmerkung. Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cam-bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

8. G.W. F. Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994, p. 45. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-versity Press, 1975, p. 40. I have modified the translation.

9. Cf. Karl Löwith, "Hegels Aufhebung der christlichen Religion", *Hegel-Studien Beiheft* 1, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Bonn: Bouvier, 1964, p. 194.

10. Hegel, *Vorrede zu Hinrichs' Religionsphilosophie*, p. 62/*Religion and Religious Truth*, p. 241.

11. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des "Rechts Vorrede"*.

12. While it may be true to say that Hegel holds the view that one should not confuse the spheres of faith and reason with each other, so that in this respect his conceptual account of Christianity has nothing to do with the individual faith of the believer, this claim cannot be used to demonstrate the compatibility of Kierkegaard's and Hegel's accounts of the relation of faith to reason. For even though Hegel thinks that faith and philosophy are distinct from each other, his claim that, in the case of Christianity, the identity of their content can be demonstrated by means of a philosophy of religion is clearly at odds with Kierkegaard's account of the absolute paradox, which maintains the impossibility of comprehending the latter. The claim that Kierkegaard's and Hegel's accounts of the relation of faith to reason are not incompatible with each other because Hegel's conceptual account of Christianity has nothing to do with the faith of the individual believer is to be found in Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 480ff.

13. Hegel's main attempts to exhibit the compatibility of the doctrine of the Trinity with the speculative truths of his philosophical system are to be found in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, which was first published in 1817, and his later Berlin lectures on the philosophy of religion. Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes, Werke* 3, pp. 545–574. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, paragraphs 748-787. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830) *Dritter Teil: Die Philosophie des Geistes, Werke* 10, §§ 564-571. *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind,* trans. William Wallace & A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion 3: Die Vollendete Religion*, ed. Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg: Meiner, 1995. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Volume III: The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, Berkeley, Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1985.

14. Cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 1, p. 293.

15. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 1, p. 294.

16. Cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 3, p. 157.

17. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 3, p. 239.

18. Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d'Holbach, *Le Christianisme dévoilé*, in *Œuvres philosophiques,* Tome I, Paris: Editions Alive, 1998, p. 48.

19. Cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 3, p. 42.

20. Cf. William Desmond, "Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation", *Philosophical Studies* 30, 1984, pp. 15f.

21. Cf. Strauss, *Streitschriften zur Verteidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu*, p. 57. *In Defense of my 'Life of Jesus' against the Hegelians*, p. 3. For an account of Hegel's influence on Strauss' most famous work see Breuss, "Das Leben Jesu von David Friedrich Strauß und die Hegelsche Philosophie", *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 19, 1972.

22. Cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols, Tübingen: Osiander, 1835–1836, vol. 1, pp. 1ff. *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972, pp. 39ff.

23. Cf. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, vol. 1, p. vii / *The Life of Jesus*, p. lii.

24. Cf. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, vol. 2, pp. 734f. / *The Life of Jesus*, p. 780.

25. Hegel claims, for example, that "God is [present] as consciousness, or the consciousness of God means that finite consciousness has its essence [*Wesen*], this God, as its object; and it knows the object as its essence, it makes itself objective [*sich gegenständlich macht*]." *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* 3, p. 99. I have slightly modified the translation.

26. Kierkegaard nevertheless grants that the "modern allegorising trend" which "summarily declares Christianity to be a myth" is at least open about what it is doing (*KW* 12.1, 218; *SV1* 7, 183). Arguably he would not think that the same could be said of Hegel.

27. Cf. Desmond, *Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation*, p. 12.

28. Cf. Michael Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970, pp. 235ff.

29. Cf. Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist*, p. 235.

30. Cf. Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist*, pp. 235f.

31. Cf. Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist*, pp. 237f.

32. The fact that this is what Theunissen has in mind is suggested by his claim that Hegel has need of another argument in addition to the one that is to establish the necessity of the divine-human unity. This additional argument is needed in order to establish that "God revealed himself in a sin-

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gle human being in order that the unity of the human and divine natures, which thought has grasped distinctly, might also become clear and certain to the type of consciousness which is dependent on sensory experience." Cf. *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist*, p. 240. A similar idea seems to be at work in the case of the claim that Hegel's philosophy presupposes "historically" that the Incarnation of God in Christ has for the Christian community already taken place. Cf. James Yerkes, *The Christology of Hegel*, Albany: State University Press of New York, 1983, p. 112. This claim is, however, an ambiguous one: for it could be taken to mean only that the representation of the Incarnation must have already entered human consciousness; yet this would be compatible with the idea that it is a product of the mythical consciousness of the early Christian community, as Strauss thinks it is.

33. Cf. Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist*, p. 238.
34. Theunissen is himself aware of this problem. Cf. *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist*, p. 239.
35. Cf. Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundations of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson, Berkeley, Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1990, pp. 319ff.
36. Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, trans. George L. Stengren, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 82. This is not to say that Thulstrup is right in thinking that such incompatibility more generally characterizes the relation of Kierkegaard's thought to Hegel's philosophy. Against Thulstrup's predominantly negative account of this relation, Jon Stewart, in *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, argues that Hegel's thought, especially his dialectical method, also had a positive influence on Kierkegaard.