

Lecture 5: Modern Trinitarian Theology

- Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in the Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993)
- Peter C. Phan (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns & Oates, 1970)
- Robert J. Wozniak and Giulio Maspero (eds), *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012)

Introduction

- Last week's lecture showed the importance of the critique of theism for modern theology.
- Some responded with a radical form of negative theology (Barth) or the project of theology after religion (Bonhoeffer).
- But: modern theology also saw re-emergence of trinitarian theology.
- This lecture will discuss one important philosophical inspiration and three very different theological responses.

Introduction II

1. G.W.F. Hegel: post-Kantian philosopher who defended philosophical thought about God and saw trinitarianism and Christology as Christianity's most important philosophical contributions.
2. Karl Barth: after the negative theology of his early, dialectical phase, Barth's mature theology is built on trinitarian theology.
3. Karl Rahner: critiqued the neglect of trinitarian theology, blamed it on the distinction of immanent and economic Trinity.
4. John Zizioulas: argued that modern trinitarian theology should learn from the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)



Reading

- Ch. Taylor, *Hegel*, Cambridge 1977
- K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, ch. on Hegel
- E. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*, Chicago 1967
- W. Desmond, *Hegel's God. A Counterfeit Double?* London 2003
- C O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, New York 1994
- N Adams, *The Eclipse of Grace*, Oxford 2013
- Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, Oxford 2005.

Hegel I

- Had concurrent interests in philosophy and theology, but *he* always wrote as philosopher.
- Yet: hugely influential for theology in 19th/20th centuries.
- Also: H.'s own thought is deeply informed by his theological background.
- Hegel started from Kant's critique of God's knowability.
- 'To draw a boundary implies knowledge of what is on the other side'.

Hegel II

- Unlike Kant, Hegel affirmed the philosophical task of thinking about God.
- Otherwise philosophy would separate itself from most central questions and leave them to theology.
- He connects this new separation of faith and knowledge with the rise of Protestantism and its strong notion of faith (subjectivism).
- Modern faith wants to be shielded from analytical reason.

Hegel III

- Solution: philosophy can think God again by mediating his transcendence with his immanence.
- Adopts from theology the idea of 'death of God' → 'Speculative Good Friday'.
- Hegel's God is not the immutable absolute being of traditional metaphysics.
- He is 'absolute' by being both immutable and mutable, infinite and finite.
- How is this possible?

Hegel IV

- Here Hegel draws on Christian trinitarianism.
- In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (published posthumously in 1832), Hegel interpreted religion in its historical development.
- Religion exists where human beings interact with the absolute (~ religion = belief in God).
- People attach the fulfilment of all their wishes and hopes, the supreme heights of their existence and the climax of their knowledge to an encounter with God.

Hegel V

- This encounter however occurs in the mode of 'representation'. It is concrete, relies on images.
- This can happen in different ways, so the history of religion is reconstructed in three steps (typical for Hegel's overall method).
 1. God is nature (veneration of stars etc.).
 2. God is anti-nature (God is transcendent, Judaism).
 3. God is in nature *as* the transcendent one (Christianity).

Hegel VI

- In Christianity, the highest stage of knowledge of the absolute *within religion* is accomplished.
- In this sense, it is 'revealed' religion, it fully reveals the concept of religion.
- It abolishes the earlier stages but preserves what was valuable in them by lifting them up to a higher stage (threefold meaning of 'sublation').
- Christianity is again depicted in three steps.

Hegel VII

- First: God is Father, not-world.
- The supreme being but also an empty concept.
- At the second stage, he becomes world.
- Yet this process is conflictual culminating in the death of Jesus, the Son of God, on the cross.
- At the point of maximum alienation begins the third phase, the period of the spirit which brings God and world together again.
- Both God and world are fully and truly known at this stage.

Hegel VIII

- Karl Barth: Why did Hegel not become the Thomas Aquinas of Protestant theology?
- Powerful attempt to reinsert trinitarianism into philosophical (and theological) reflection about God.
- Trinity is *necessary* outcome of attempts to think about God as the absolute.
- Yet: Hegel argues for a transition from faith to knowledge. Does he leave room for religion?

Karl Barth's Trinitarianism I

- Peter S. Oh, *Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Karl Barth's Analogical Use of the Trinitarian Relation* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).
- Iain Taylor, 'In Defence of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5.1 (2003), 33–46.
- Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation, with special reference to Volume One of Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).
- —, 'The Trinity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 72–91.
- Rowan D. Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God', in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 147–93.

Barth's Trinitarianism II

- In the late 1920s, Barth moved away from his early, dialectical phase.
- Recognition that radical separation of world and God could not solve his original problem of how to 'let God be God'.
- Instead: emphasis on God's revelation.
- God is not remote but has made himself known to humanity.
- God is not remote *because* he has made himself known to humanity.

Barth's Trinitarianism III

- God made himself known through his Word.
- We encounter this in three forms: in the preaching of the Church, in the Bible, and in Jesus Christ.
- Barth's mature theology is thus radically Christocentric.
- It is *in this sense* also radically trinitarian.
- The Trinity is known to us, so to speak, prior to our knowledge of the single God.
- Natural theology (knowledge of God without revelation) is excluded.

Barth's Trinitarianism IV

- Barth's Christocentrism has further consequences.
- Any knowledge of God we have is already coloured by God's salvific deed.
- We know God as trinitarian = we know God only from the perspective of a world that is already reconciled with him.
- But this reconciliation is not *necessary*, unlike in Hegel.
- It therefore can only be grasped in faith.

Karl Rahner (1904-1984)

- Starting point: why is the Trinity of so little theological and ecclesial significance?
- Differentiation between 'immanent' and 'economic' Trinity
- Immanent Trinity: Trinitarian Persons in their mutual relationship.
- In this they have different functions (Father - cause etc.)

Rahner II

- Economic Trinity:
- God in his relation to the world.
- Here the Persons have an identical activity.
- This means that for all practical purposes the differences between the Persons have become insignificant.
- Therefore Rahner's famous maxim is this:

Rahner III

- *The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.* (the 'Grundaxiom')
- Whatever the Trinity is must be identical with its revelation in salvation history.
- The Christ event 'symbolises' the Trinity:
- The Father in his absoluteness
- The Son as the principle active in history
- The Spirit who has been given to us and is accepted by us.

Rahner IV

- Critique: Reduces Trinity to its activity in the history of salvation.
- Important is mutuality: economic and immanent Trinity are said to be identical
- Not: one reduced to the other.

John Zizioulas (*1931)

- *Being as Communion* (1985)
- Trinitarian theology in the 4th century meant a 'revolution in ontology'.
- 'Entities trace no longer their being to being itself – but to the person, to precisely that which constitutes being, that is, enables entities to be entities. In other words, from an adjunct to being (a kind of mask) the person becomes the being itself and is simultaneously – a most significant point – the constitutive element of beings.'

Zizioulas II

- 'Among the Greek Fathers the unity of God, the one God, and the unity of the "principle" or "cause" of being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the hypostasis, that is the Person of the Father.'
- Hypostasis is not merely individual, but 'person'.

Zizioulas III

- Person is based on the notion of freedom.
- Being is 'product of freedom'.
- *God 'exists' on account of a person, the Father, and not on account of a substance.*
- The root of this discovery is 'ecclesial experience' (the relevant fathers were all bishops)

Zizioulas IV

- 'The experience [of the ecclesial being] revealed something very important: the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love. Being means life and life means communion.'
- Being is communion: of the Church which is rooted in life of the Trinity.