Mining Hegel for holistic identity: Three exploratory theological forays

Sarah Bacaller
Stirling Theological College (University of Divinity)
Western Sydney University

Core question: What conceptual resources are able to frame human existence and distinctive Christian identity for secular vocation—beyond implicit dualisms inherent in sacred/secular distinctions?

The demarcation of sacred from secular can have dramatic effects on the freedom to explore Christian vocation in so-called ‘secular’ society.\(^1\) The development of the idea of the secular in contrast to the religious, spiritual or sacred throughout Western history is traced in a footnote to this introduction and is available on handouts for anyone who is interested. It is the distinction of

\(^1\) It is important to trace the development of the word ‘secular’ as a precursor to this paper. Initially the Latin, \textit{saeculum}, simply referred to a fixed period of time and was not understood by reference to religion or the idea of the ‘sacred’. (See Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook, “Introduction: The Study of Secularism” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Secularism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-14. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988457.013.1.) Augustine contrasts the \textit{civitas Dei} with the \textit{civitas terræ} (or \textit{diabola}) in \textit{The City of God} (particularly books XI-XXII) and Ebeling suggests that this distinction shaped a milieu whereby conceptual engagement throughout the medieval period took this distinction in two directions: firstly, as relating to the coexistence and opposition between Christians and non-Christians in the world; secondly, as setting up a distinction within the inner structure of the Christian body, both between clergy and laity and between religious and secular authorities—a relation that could not be more central to Europe’s history (see Gerhard Ebeling, \textit{Luther: An Introduction to his Thought} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), especially 175–191). Luther writes on the distinctions and relations of these oppositions. His \textit{Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation} (1520) and his letter, \textit{On Temporal Authority: To what extent it should be obeyed} (1523) address the relationship between religious and secular authority (vociferously challenging the claims of the Catholic hierarchy to be outside the jurisdiction of secular authority; see Timothy F. Lull ed. \textit{Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings}, 2Nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 429–460 and \textit{Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes Volume II}, intro. and trans. C.M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 2015), 57–166. In this sense, Luther subsumes religious authority within the rule of secular authority, which is nevertheless under God. However, secular authority is seen as a necessity precisely because human nature requires such direction. In all this, an understanding of Christian identity is dynamic, contextual and ethical. Ordained authorities of the church do not behave as Christians; secular authorities do the work of Christ. Significantly, Luther dissolves any difference in value between sacred and profane (or secular) professions (‘It is pure invention that pope, bishops priests and monks are to be called the ‘spiritual estate’; princes, lords, artisans and farmers the ‘temporal estate. That is indeed a fine bit of lying and hypocrisy.’ \textit{Open Letter}). Luther argues that all are of the spiritual estate, while nevertheless suggesting that true Christians of character are extremely rare. He contests the division of Christ into the two bodies of ‘temporal’ and ‘spiritual’. With Luther’s thought, secular life is affirmed for the essential role it plays in human life, including that of holding religious authority to account. While there is a clear distinction between the ‘two kingdoms’ of Christ and the world, it is the dynamic nature of the relation between the two that Luther handles with dexterity and nuance.

To return to the usage of the word ‘secular’, with Luther as a backdrop and with an awareness of the implications of the separation of Church and State in European history, its decisive historical development in contrast with the sacred was entangled with the Enlightenment. (Juergensmeyer notes that for much of history and in many places still, the idea of ‘religion’ itself and therefore of the secular in contrast to religion, is almost a non-concept. Religion simply \textit{is} embedded culture, art and life; similarly, he struggles to find words for ‘secular’ in other linguistic contexts; in other places, the ‘secular’ and ‘secularism’ are ideas that generate fear and anger, as encroaching threats, particularly of Western ideology. See Mark Juergensmeyer, ‘The imagined war between Secularism and Religion’ in Zuckerman and Shook, \textit{Secularism}, 71–83). The French Revolution and the North America’s constitution attempted clear disentanglement of Church from State. The term ‘secularism’ with its contemporary connotations as a non-religious ethical approach to life and society seems first to have been used Holyoake in 1851 in Britain, in preference to the term ‘atheism’ (Zuckerman and Shook, \textit{Secularism}, 2–4). Holyoake became a staunch proponent of secularism and developed the idea extensively in his periodical \textit{The Reasoner}, and in later publications (see for example, G.J. Holyoake, ed. \textit{The Reasoner} Vol. XIII (London: James Watson, Paternoster Row, 1852)). Definitions of the term ‘secular’ developed in early English dictionaries from the beginnings of the 18th century, and include its contrast to the ‘worldly’, ‘spiritual’ or ‘eternal’ (as instead, ‘temporal’) with growing decisiveness to the present time (Zuckerman and Shook, \textit{Secularism}, 5–7, 9). Zuckerman notes also the breadth of the current definition of the idea of the ‘secular’; there is much terminological slippage in the concept’s usage.

My use of the word \textit{secular} in this paper works initially from the dually structured understanding of reality that is often disseminated with the various senses that ‘secular’ contrasts ‘religious’, ‘sacred’ or ‘spiritual reality’ (and in religious contexts, that \textit{secular} is inferior or even threatening to it), yet seeks to work beyond this duality by demonstrating its untenable foundation and problematic effects by reference to a christological centre. Luther’s approach to ‘the profane’ is instructive here, while Hegel helps to work beyond some of the implicit parameters Luther works within. 
the secular or temporal by reference to the religious, sacred or spiritual that forms the backdrop here. A recognition of the anxiety, tribalism and sense of threat often accompanying sacred/secular divisions fuels my engagement.2

Early nineteenth century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel offers resources for shifting the implicit presuppositions supporting a dualistic division of sacred and secular. I here offer three short, experimental theological forays utilising Hegel’s christological philosophy, to resource Christian identity toward wholehearted engagement in human flourishing. At times, my engagement with Hegel will be relegated to unspoken footnotes as I seek to heuristically perform Hegel—that is, to utilize his thinking tools—to make headway in this area.

The first foray deploys Hegel’s motif of double negation to think through and beyond the potential potential pitfalls of sacred/secular dualism. The second explores the role of layered social structures in forming both individual and collective identity. The third alludes to Hegel’s dialectical subject-object relation as a resource for and expression of Christian ethos.

1. Beyond dualism

Is Christian identity constituted of and measured by an ability to tick boxes of belief, behaviour and even belonging within whichever paradigms and Christian narratives happen to be contingently present or deemed authoritative?3 This may be denied but can be belied by language culture within Christian communities, especially when Christianity identity is narrated as embodying an opposition to the secular.4

Corolling of Christian thought and behavior suggests anxiety as to identity—uncertainty regarding definition. If christologically, the law is now written on human hearts, where exactly is this and what is written?5 Tacit and explicit lines of demarcation between sacred and secular may be invoked as useful markers here, to define what falls acceptably within the range of ‘Christian’ and what does not; yet such demarcation can perpetuate the very anxiety it seeks to allay, by presupposing that one could fall off the edge of Christian identity or perhaps not quite be Christian-enough.6 With a looming threat of excision, potential transgression becomes a source of anxious attention; obedience or fulfilment become anxiety-fueled rather than life-giving, generative and expansive. Such status-anxiety can be subtly violent, as anxiety about my own vulnerability is

---

2 See Juergensmeyer, Secularism, 71–83.
4 An interesting contrast is the university context, where for example, the University of Divinity (Melbourne)’s founding Act (1910, S.27) states that: ‘No religious test shall be imposed upon any person in order to entitle the person to be enrolled by the University or to be a candidate for any examination or to graduate or to receive any diploma or certificate or to be an examiner or to hold any office or employment or any advantage emolument or privilege in connexion with the university context’. See Section 27, p28 at http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/uda1910296/ Accessed June 20, 2019. This raises important questions about what the joint aims of the educative context offer, that church communities may not. This is not to say that there are no mutually agreed upon processes of ethical behaviour in the university context; quite the contrary, but the terms of belonging are shifted. Are they still predicated however, on a sacred/secular divide or do they transcend this by reference to a wider ethical realm which can nevertheless be understood as being predicated by a christological impetus?
5 Rom. 2
6 ‘For what the law was powerless to do ...’ (Rom. 8). Slavoj Žižek on the ‘vicious dialectic’ of law and sin: The Fragile Absolute or Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for? (London: Verso) 2000, 136–138; Trouble in Paradise: From the end of history to the end of capitalism (UK: Penguin) 2015, 99–101. My assertion here is also underpinned by a recognition that physiologically, constant threat, anxiety or trauma can inhibit the formation of narratival identity and cohesive self-understanding, as well as the capacity for the human mind (and so, body) to learn beyond and within its threatening context.
projected as a desire to control others. Crippling trepidation is a source of lost opportunities for trust, hope and courageous imagination.

In attempting to move beyond circumscription of thought and behaviour, Christian narratives might instead begin espousing the importance of subjective feeling; for example, highlighting the importance of ‘sacred’ spaces, rituals or experiences. However, relying on subjectivity can become self-enclosed and relativized, losing communal points of reference or veritable tools for weighing the helpfulness of various assertions, because personal truth is posited as unquestionable. This undermines the importance of hermeneutical reflection and critique.

Truth is complex and dynamic within human identity and experience. Religious doctrine, narrative and praxis offer reference points for identity, but they also shape identity by the tonality of their application. If they are applied punitively or dogmatically, with underlying assumptions about the value or capacities of human selfhood or with dualistic presuppositions, human identity is shaped by these modes of relation. Selfhood is learned and gained relationally.

What function then do Christian behavioural or belief markers, whether narrativized or semi-legalised, fulfil? Significantly, they limit or demarcate. Demarcation (Hegel’s *negation*) is not negative; without demarcation, nothing is what it is. The Gestalt principle of figure-ground demonstrates this; limit allows us to break up a field of vision into its various elements, even if the relationship between these is not simply black and white. Yet demarcation can occur either with or without violence. Once ‘sacred’ has been opposed to ‘secular’, this definition (or mutual negation) cannot simply disappear; it must be raised into a higher sphere that changes the nature of the relation so that this opposition can be recognized without being wholly defining. We step back from the image to take in a wider horizon.

In Christ, as both *fulfilment* and end (telos) of law, previous religious demarcations are negated; previous understandings of selfhood and community are both preserved and cancelled. That is, the politics of belonging are raised into a higher frame by which they are newly defined, so

---

7 In Hegel’s time, such an approach was articulated by figures like Jacobi and Schleiermacher, to whom Hegel responds. See Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2002. Also Peter C. Hodgson’s introduction to, and Hegel’s lectures on the *Philosophy of Religion* 1827.

8 Negation, a notion central to Hegelian philosophy, is essential to anything being what it is. Think how, in an image, ground and figure need one another to be what they are. Negation generates distinction in relation. Hegel’s *determinate negation* describes how any thing is what it is only by contrast to what it is not, but in particular (so determinately), by contrast to what it *might* be if it were not itself. Any thing’s potential negations are therefore differentiations that are related to it but distinct from it. In Hegel’s dialectic, negation is in turn negated, as elevation incorporates previous negation—so *aufheben*, often translated as sublation, which both cancels and preserves the moment of distinction in expansion. This movement occurs in diverse human experience of phenomena and is, Hegel argues, central to the development of human consciousness as particularly human consciousness, self-consciousness. In Hegel’s philosophy of mind, consciousness is in its immediacy, is then ruptured in negation, and returns to itself as reconciled with its negation. Hegel expands the previous understandings of negation found in logic and mathematic. See Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers 1992, repr. 1999) 199-202; Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism: Mind, Nature and the Final Ends of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press 2013). Especially see Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic; Philosophy of Religion* 1827.


10 Rom. 10; *Aufheben* (sublation) is the ‘negation of negation’ pivotal to Hegel’s dialectic, a method pervading his philosophical works.
more truly known; previous definitions are changed by their christologically altered context.\textsuperscript{11} Thus Matthew 5 (\textit{You have heard it said, but I say unto you ... }) invokes a situational dynamic or ethic, a social ‘space of reason’ and responsibility that is informed by dialectical interchange between content and context, not defined by sacred/secular dualism.\textsuperscript{12} As written on human hearts, engagement with (religious) law and lore moves from a space of abstraction as absolutely authoritative, to being discerningly and responsibly owned, existing in the social space of reason, volition and intentionality. It invokes the possibilities of trust and responsibility.\textsuperscript{13}

Christologically, identity is not predicated on dualistic anxiety about inclusion or exclusion, nor does it seek undifferentiated unity that swallows individual uniqueness; rather, identity is a christological gift whose purpose might be articulated as ‘unity-in-and-through-difference’—fullness of life.\textsuperscript{14}

Such ethical positioning is organically yet intentionally developed as ethical nature, a second nature—described by Hegel as being reborn, not of flesh (i.e. nature) but of spirit, preserving and yet raising nature by volitional agency and development of skill and wisdom.\textsuperscript{15} Integral Christian ethos must sublate dualistic identity to a wider frame of reference—not a mere transposition of a more absolute version of law’s absoluteness, but a creative reframing that affirms humanity’s unique capacity to think situationally, develop practical wisdom and engage in the development of ethical communities. Christian identity is not ungrounded nor is it pinned to legalistic frames, whether doctrinal, behavioural or apparently moral; it is dialectical, sublating the separation of the divine and the finite into an expanded finitude.

\textbf{2. Objective right}

The process of self-conscious life’s maturation is traced in Hegel’s philosophy as the development of Geist—that is spirit or mind as restless and always moving. This spirit, in human expression within individual bodies and collectively, is shaped in three modes.\textsuperscript{16}

These are: first, subjective mind, in which the movement of existence is traced from immediacy or immediate sensuous experience, through its various stages to self-conscious thought. Second, objective mind, as the social structures, from family through civil society to state, which concretise identity. Third, absolute spirit or mind, in which humans seek to understand themselves through art, religion and self-reflexive, critical thought.\textsuperscript{17} Humans strive toward self-conscious interpretation so that what they are in themselves becomes present for them, akin to the process of subconscious thought moving into conscious articulation. This process of ‘becoming’ shapes what it is that is becoming.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{11} On sublation through a shift in context, see Pinkard, Hegel’s Naturalism, 36.
\textsuperscript{12} ‘Situation ethics’ as a term is crystallised in Joseph Fletcher’s classic text, Situation Ethics (London: SCM Press) 1966; it is pertinent, even if Fletcher arguably goes too far in his reaction against dogmatic ‘ethics’ (and not far enough, in terms of being able to articulate new ways of thinking distinctive Christological identity). On the ‘space of reason’, see Pinkard, Hegel’s Naturalism.
\textsuperscript{13} Romans 2; Hegel, Philosophy of Religion 1827, 373-5, 395-6, 405-6; Pinkard, Hegel’s Naturalism.
\textsuperscript{14} After John 10:10. Robert Williams interprets Hegel’s entire dialectic as expressing the possibility of ‘unity in and through difference’ (extending beyond Rosen’s ‘unity-in-difference’). See Williams, Hegel on the Proofs and Personhood of God especially Introduction (pp5-6), Ch. 3 and Ch. 5.
\textsuperscript{16} See particularly Hegel, Philosophy of Mind; Philosophy of Right; Phenomenology of Spirit.
\textsuperscript{17} On 1, 2 and 3: Hegel. Philosophy of Mind, on 2, Outlines of the Philosophy of Right. A performative demonstration of this: Phenomenology of Spirit.
Hegel’s recognition of the role of sociality in shaping the self in this triunity is significant. In the realm of objective mind/spirit, freedom is actualised both in and beyond laws, in custom, social practice and interpersonal interaction. Hegel recognises the self as shaped by these structures just as, dialectically, these structures are shaped by human life. Already, in this simple observation, the space for division between sacred and secular becomes non-sensical. Particular communities of right and custom are not superior by reference to sacred status; phenomenologically, human life simply exists as shaped by the communities, customs and accountabilities to which it belongs. This shifts the focus from self-protective tribalism between purportedly sacred and secular contexts, to responsibility for shaping social structures that affirm human dignity and co-operatively resource human flourishing.18

Recalibration is always occurring in micro- and macro- movements within families, societies, nations and global communities, even if the methods for social change lean problematically toward lawful circumscription, while attempts to inaugurate enhanced freedom inevitably miss the mark. Yet self-reflexive Christian discernment within secular involvement cannot fully occur without incarnationally affirmed, relaxed engagement in secular life—as gift, affirmed by a gospel given for the world.19

If narratives of Christian selfhood problematise the phenomenological reality of personhood being shaped through the social and secular structures we inhabit, or if these structures are thoughtlessly or intentionally demonised, even subtly, human life is torn between a very real need to engage in its social contexts and a sense of compromise in doing so. Secular engagement somehow ‘taints’ a misperceived ‘purity’ of Christian identity.20 Such narratives undermine the very social fabric that has the capacity to interweave human community, fragmenting the impetus toward christological transformation of human social existence. This resistance also inhibits critical reflection, which requires genuine, trusting and intelligent engagement in secular life and a willingness to hold in vulnerability, various tensions. If secular social structures are an important facet of human identity, dualistic defensiveness misses opportunities to recognise and assimilate the helpful aspects of recognition (whether legal, social or creative) afforded by social structures.21 Inversely, this missed opportunity perpetuates an undercurrent of pressure toward Christian ‘colonisation’ of the secular.

Human life at every level of social organisation is always in various shades of self-corruption. Interpreting problems and striving toward redemptive actualities requires contextual, deft responsiveness and learning. It is because in Christ, a new horizon of human dignity and affirmation within finitude is painted, that Christians can both engage with and think beyond the current state of secular social structures, recognizing both their vital role in shaping human self-

18 Clive Marsh (Christ in Focus) argues for human flourishing as the criteria for judging christological narratives. What this flourishing is, is of course shaped by the christological stories themselves but is also fluid and contextual, as in situational ethics, and is therefore always being developed and discovered by dialectical movement with christological anchorage. Clive Marsh, Christ in Focus: Radical Christocentrism in Christian Theology (London, UK: SCM Press) 2013, especially Ch. 8.


understanding and their degrees of compromise, working to reshape them for greater human flourishing by ethical, responsible engagement. Gospel, as given for the world, is given to shape social worlds that shape human life through recognise social structures.

3. Dialectical expansion
Christian narratives commonly exhibit an eclectic mix of absolute, authoritative assertions with appeals to the enclosed subjectivity of experience. Hegel demonstrates that these poles of absolutism and relativism mutually reinforce one another, as reactions simply reinforce their opposites. Dogmatic, absolute assertions are too brittle to withstand the truthfulness of the complexity of human thought and being, and relativism is finally nihilistic in being unable to engage difference. It is essential to explicating any concept of God that authority and truth are handled with both rigor and gentleness; this is not philosophical elitism but a recognition that when these are mishandled, ethical effects are generated, both through the use of language, which as deed both expresses and creates, and by the use of an inflexible logic of relationality that shatters human experience. Christological selfhood can be shaped by an understanding of subject-object relation, so truth, authority and relationality, that moves within an ethical, social ‘space of reasons’, and can be handled with dialectical veracity and ethical integrity.

Here, sacred and secular cannot remain binary opposites; I recognise that within the binary relation, ‘secularism’ can be just as dogmatic and punitive as forms of the ‘sacred’. Rather, the opposition calls forth an expanded concept of the secular, where the secular is the sublation of a presumptive human-divine opposition—a shared space that both cancels and preserves the difference of finitude and infinitude. This is the logic of incarnation. Christological ethos works to transform any space to be life-giving, even as the understanding of what is ‘life-giving’ must be constantly re-evaluated and weighed. It is in giving up the quest for religious enlightenment, purity, arrival or perfection, that we transcend the limitation that is necessary to finite life, as limited finitude loses its invested spectral value, no longer cutting us off from the infinite, but rather, becoming the condition of relation with it.

Reversion is not an option; remaining bound to a perceived but illusory journey back to Edenic innocence keeps Christian identity pinned to its negation. There is a distinctiveness to christological testimony that steps out on the other side of the opposition between infinite and finite. Hegel’s phenomenology and logic of the subject-object relation offer tools for figuring relationality beyond a sacred/secular dualism, so liberating whole-hearted christological engagement toward human flourishing.

Conclusion

---

22 The dynamics of this section, particularly regarding embracing the necessity of finitude and particularity, while these are also sublated, are explored in depth in Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion 1827.
24 Pinkard, Hegel’s Naturalism; Williams, Hegel on the Proofs and Personhood of God; Bubbio, God and the self in Hegel.
25 See particularly ‘Section III: Consummate Religion’ in Hegel, Philosophy of Religion.
26 For nothing can separate us from the love of God, Rom. 8
The secular is already a shared space where infinite and finite dialectically exist together, as freedom coming to actuality. This space makes sense of human life while also making space for its non-sense. Precisely here, Christian identity cannot rely on ambit claims of *sacredness* to affirm its validity, dogmatically or subjectively. While there is a valid immediacy to the experience of faith, it must wrestle with what it *is* when it claims to be Christian. This involves taking responsibility for the normativities created within Christian communities and may involve loss, a negation of perceived identity markers. Yet precisely here, the role of those committed to a Christian stance in the world—to an affirmation of the christologically anchored dignity of human beings and the coming-to-be of redemptive ethical and relational positioning—is affirmed, by participatory engagement in secular space … or rather, our world. History is peppered with Christian communities doing just this.

By engagement with these motifs of Hegelian thought, the process of thinking Christian vocation is resourced and expanded to affirm immediate subjective experience, sociality and civic interaction, and the role of norms in shaping identity in an ethos of distinctively Christian engagement in the world.