

WHY PHILOSOPHY MATTERS

by Robert L. Phillips

Continuing the revolution from Germany, on 25 February comes a statement from two clerics, Cardinal Marx and Bishop Bode, affirming that no Roman Synod can prevent German bishops from doing what they must do. We are not, they state, subsidiaries of Rome and so will not wait for a Synod to tell them their duty on how to shape pastoral care regarding marriage and family matters. This is a clear call for independence from the See of Peter in the language of the new Reformation. Does nothing good ever come out of Germany?

But there is more to this than paranoid rhetoric or the current liberal obsession with mercy at the expense of truth, (as if the condemnation of sin is not itself the supreme exemplar of mercy). Rather, these pronouncements from the Fatherland are steeped in a foundational metaphysical system going back to and originating in the works of the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. It is important to be aware of this and to recognize the baleful influence of Hegel on the Second Vatican Council, lest we might think that the current uproar is merely temporary insanity.

A crash course in Hegelianism: From Plato onward philosophy has understood that what is most real is unconditioned and eternal Being. It was the singular triumph of Saint Thomas to realize that this God of philosophy, the Unconditioned First Cause, is the same as the God of Genesis – so that what the God of the Bible reveals to us may be accepted by reason.

This magnificent synthesis of faith and reason held and shaped the West until the late 18th century. The key argument of classical philosophy was that the flux of time and change is insufficient logically to explain itself – that which is finite and contingent, or ever changing, cannot be the cause or explanation of itself. And so we must posit a non contingent being as the originating and sustaining cause of everything. All of this philosophical argumentation is packed into the first four words of the Bible: "In the beginning God". It follows that change and contingency, which philosophers call "becoming", is an inferior mode of being. At the world's end, time will give way to eternity. If reason can demonstrate the necessity

and superiority of eternal being, what is the purpose of time (becoming)? The answer of Catholic theology and philosophy is that time is the arena of soul formation wherein finite souls freely choose Heaven or Hell. When this process is completed, time will disappear. In Huxley's famous phrase, Time must have a stop.

Hegel's systematic philosophy is a complete dismantling of the theological, philosophical, and historical foundations of Christianity. On the historical level, he defines religion as "Religion is t das Absolute in der form der Vorstellung". Religion is philosophy expressed in the form of myths or presentations tied to specific historical periods. It makes no sense to ask whether the Bible is an accurate historical account. Readers will recognize this way of thinking as one of the points of origin of the nineteenth century, mainly German, school of biblical criticism known as "demythologization", a typically ugly word which means that the Bible is a collection of stories illustrative of certain philosophical truths. The "Jesus story" only illustrates the fact that, for Hegel, truth must become incarnate in history because there is nothing else but history (time). Jesus is not the son of God and Savior of the world. In this regard we may call Hegel the father of Modernism. Under this guise Modernism was to enter, via Germany, Catholic Scripture studies, where it lingers in many quarters to this day.

At the heart of the philosophical disaster wrought by Hegel is his concept of the Dialectic. Previous philosophers, it is said, in their search for eternal truths did not take history seriously. They downgraded time in their emphasis on Being itself. But, and this is Hegel's main contribution, time just is Being – reality is structured dialectically. A moment in time generates it opposite which opposition is then overcome by a new moment in time. Thus truth is fluid and cannot be fixed hence there are no trans-historical truths. For classical and, especially, Catholic philosophy, time is a creature like any other, not the central category of metaphysics. What follows from all of this is that human beings are essentially spectators observing the constant unfolding of the Dialectic bringing a continuous stream of novelty. Thus, for Hegel, God is a process, ever evolving.

Although Hegel's literary style is a swamp of turgid teutonic terminology, his influence on Catholic thinking has been profound. Returning to our two German prelates, the fundamental reason that we must seriously examine the admission of the divorced to communion, examine the positive values in homosexuality, attend to the possible virtues of cohabitation, and so on,

is because of, and this is a direct quote from Marx and Bode, "The dialogical structure of reality," that is to say, reality structured according to Hegel's dialectic. They also add that this "dialogical structure" underlies the Second Vatican Council, and in this they are certainly correct.

The lesson we need to absorb here is that the ongoing revolution is not a product of mushy liberal-think which sentimentally yearns for the "Big Tent" in which all – irrespective of what they believe – are "welcome at the table of the Lord, as we are all Church". On the contrary, there is here a hard core metaphysics that first brought Vatican II, and now, under the guise of Mercy, has the Church flirting with schism. This alternative view of reality is seldom made so explicit but it underlies every initiative for novelty.

The "dialogical structure of reality", it so happens, works best as an interpretive device within pluralist secular society where absolute norms are already deeply suspect. The Hegelian mode of thinking lends intellectual weight to a culture already pre-disposed to an absolute individualism which itself merely masks a studied indifference to the good of others. How easy and with what relief we overlook the pit into which our brothers are fallen by "respecting" their autonomy and conscience! This intellectual mess is what now marches under the banner of Mercy.

For Hegel, the Dialectic of history can never be wrong (by definition) and can never reverse itself. How often do we hear, sometimes from the pulpit, that the Church must "go where the people are"? After all, in a pluralist society, history has spoken hence vox populi is the cutting edge of the "dialogical structure of reality".

We now face the return of the worst consequences of that muddled thinking, derived ultimately from the spirit of Hegel, which entered the Church via the Council. Catholics must be reminded most forcefully that both Scripture and Tradition exhort us always "to go higher" and never settle for the vagaries of history.

Robert L. Phillips DPhil (Oxon) is Professor of philosophy(emeritus) at the University of Connecticut and is the author of Last Things First: A Traditionalist Surveys the Wreckage of Vatican II (Roman Catholic Books, 2004).