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Hegel's Sacramental Politics: Confession, Forgiveness, and Absolute Spirit*

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G. W. F. Hegel wrote the *Phenomenology of Spirit* at a moment of great political and social upheaval. As the story goes, he penned its final words “under the thunder of the battle of Jena.”¹ It was October 1806, and the battle was the latest in a series of confrontations between the French and the Prussians as the Holy Roman Empire collapsed. Hegel was hopeful about the latent possibilities of his changing society, but he was also concerned about the collapse of old communities and ways of life. As the old ways disappeared, what would be the glue that held society together? How would modern individuals justify their beliefs and practices when traditional religious and political authorities no longer held sway?

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes how individuals in different types of communities might try to answer these questions. In some communities, individuals believe what they do and act the way that they do simply because that is the way things are done. Their norms have authority for them because those norms are taken to be natural, fixed, and immediately given. The problem is that when different norms come into conflict, they cannot be revised without losing their immediacy and thereby losing their authority. Hegel thinks that this is the problem that plagues Greek *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) and that gives rise to tragic drama as its paradigmatic art form. Such a form of life is characterized by incommensurable goods and tragic conflict. In other communities, Hegel suggests, norms have the

* I presented an earlier version of this essay at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago in November 2012. I am grateful to my fellow panelists and to members of the audience for their insightful comments and questions. Thanks, also, to Michael Lamb, Thomas A. Lewis, Jeffrey Stout, and the late Ronald Thiemann for feedback on this expanded version of the argument and to the *Journal of Religion* reviewer for asking the question that got to the heart of the matter.

¹ Eduard Gans, quoted in Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 227–30.

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authority that they do because they are understood to be self-legislated. Individuals justify their norms by subjecting potential beliefs and practices to critical scrutiny and then rationally endorsing them for themselves. The worry here is that, according to Hegel, a collection of individuals—each a law unto herself—does not make a cohesive community. Individuals are atomized and alienated from one another.

What Hegel is looking for—the goal of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—is a community of individuals who are neither immediately identified with their communal norms, as in Greek *Sittlichkeit*, nor alienated from them. Therefore, he catalogues the attempts by individuals and communities to justify their norms. He shows how these individuals come into conflict with one another and how their own understanding of their norms fails to help them cope with these conflicts. Again and again, Hegel describes the ways that these conflicts undermine and destroy the communities from which they emerge. It is only at the end of chapter 6 (“Spirit”) of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that Hegel depicts a conflict that ends in reconciliation rather than domination or destruction. It is at that point that full-fledged reciprocal recognition and what Hegel calls “absolute spirit” emerge.

What exactly “absolute spirit” entails, however, is one of the most disputed points of contemporary Hegel interpretation. According to Hegel, the “absolute” is the common object of religion and philosophy. The absolute is the self-sufficient standard—the standard by which beliefs, practices, and other norms are assessed—which religion identifies as “God” and which philosophy identifies as “spirit.” The interpretive dispute concerns the question of how to understand these related concepts of “absolute,” “God,” and “spirit,” and the question of how to understand the difference between religious and philosophical reflections on them. A large body of scholarship contends that Hegel should be understood as a spirit monist or speculative theologian for whom absolute spirit is a kind of pantheistic self-consciousness or divine mind.² As Peter Hodgson writes, for instance, “The being of God (the *ontos* of *theos*) discloses itself to be not pure immediacy or abstract substance or ‘supreme being’ but rather ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) in the sense of energy, movement, life, revelation, differentiation, and reconciliation. Spirit desig-

² This is a diverse group, including scholars like William Desmond, Peter Hodgson, Walter Jaeschke, and Merold Westphal. As Thomas A. Lewis notes in his review of recent Hegel scholarship, scholars such as Jaeschke, Desmond, and Hodgson “all interpret Hegel as offering a highly rationalistic account in which God is not radically other to human beings, yet they evaluate the proposal and its relation to Christianity quite differently” (“Beyond the Totalitarian: Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion in Recent Hegel Scholarship,” *Religion Compass* 2, no. 4 [2008]: 556–74, quotation at 564). See William Desmond, *Hegel’s God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Merold Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology* (1979; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), and “Hegel and Onto-Theology,” *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 41/42 (2000): 142–65.

nates a God who is intrinsically self-revelatory, self-manifesting.”³ While most of these interpreters point to important differences between what Hegel calls spirit and the transcendent God of orthodox Christianity, they nevertheless cast spirit in thoroughly metaphysical or theological terms.

Recent developments in the study of Hegel, however, have challenged such interpretations of Hegel and of the concept of absolute spirit. In the last two decades, a growing number of scholars have argued that Hegel's concept of spirit does not refer to a supernatural entity immanent in history. Rather, spirit is Hegel's word for the web of norms in which subjects and objects are bound together. It is self-sufficient when it encompasses all subjects, objects, and activities through which they relate. Absolute spirit, then, is the self-sufficient standard generated by a community that is engaged in the process of creating, sustaining, challenging, and transforming its norms and judgments over time.⁴

Given their rejection of a variety of metaphysical and theological interpretations of Hegel's concept of spirit, this latter group is often accused of ignoring Hegel's philosophy of religion and of being antitheological.⁵ In what follows, I argue that we gain insight into the debated concept by looking at Hegel's discussion of the confession and forgiveness that give rise to reciprocal recognition and absolute spirit. Through an engagement with Hegel's invocation of the sacrament of penance, I offer an interpretation of “absolute spirit” that is neither ontotheological nor antitheological.

Hegel claims that the two antagonists who confess to and forgive one another bring about the reciprocal recognition that is absolute spirit. After describing the conflict and reconciliation of the wicked and judging consciousnesses, I address this intriguing claim. I show how Hegel draws on and transforms Martin Luther's sacramental theology in order to describe the ways that finite and fallible human beings generate normative authority. What emerges from the antagonists' confession and forgiveness is absolute

³ Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 16. For a good overview of recent interpretations of Hegel's philosophy of religion, see Lewis, “Beyond the Totalitarian.”

⁴ This group of interpretations is sometimes referred to as the “new Hegel,” the “post-Kantian Hegel” or the “nonmetaphysical Hegel.” Important contributions to this group include Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust* (unpublished manuscript, available at <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/hegel/index.html>); Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). Grouping these interpretations under any of the names mentioned above has its problems, not least of which is the elision of important differences and disagreements among the various interpretations that are being grouped.

⁵ See, for instance, Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994) 86; and Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 14–15.

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spirit itself, the self-sufficient authority of the community of individuals who recognize one another as norm-governed and norm-generating subjects. This is not, as Robert Pippin has argued, a merely contingent possibility. Attention to Hegel's use of sacramental theology helps us to see how this result is conceptually and practically achieved. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of this reading of Hegel for conversations in religious studies and political theory about democratic ethics in a diverse society.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE WICKED AND JUDGING CONSCIOUSNESSES

Hegel's discussion of confession and forgiveness takes place at the end of chapter 6 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the chapter in which he describes a series of communities with different social and political arrangements and the conflicts that arise in each. Hegel's subheading for the final section of this chapter is "Conscience: The Beautiful Soul, Evil, and Its Forgiveness." In the following pages, I refer to this as the confession and forgiveness section.

In that section, Hegel introduces two individuals whom he calls the wicked consciousness and the judging consciousness. Both hold that their actions must follow from their own commitments; they must be autonomous and self-legislated. The two consciousnesses disagree, however, about how their personal commitments might count for anyone other than themselves. The wicked consciousness holds that they cannot; he takes action, but he believes that he cannot justify his actions with reasons that count for anyone else. The judging consciousness, for his part, believes that moral action must be motivated by respect for objective law and duty, and so he refuses to act at all for fear of polluting his commitment to law and duty with merely subjective desires (§659–60).⁶

The conflict comes about when the wicked consciousness takes action and the judging consciousness condemns the wicked consciousness for acting in a way that sullies the purity of moral duty with subjective intentions and desires. The wicked consciousness recognizes that the judging consciousness is right. However, he recognizes that the judgment is right not only about the action that he took but also about the judgment issued by the judge. Like the wicked consciousness's action, the judging consciousness's judgment is an action undertaken by an individual with a partial or subjective point of view. Thus, the wicked consciousness recognizes that he and the judge are in the same situation: "the judgmental consciousness, in terms of the way that consciousness is constituted, is the same as himself" (§ 666).

⁶ Further references to the *Phenomenology* include the section number of G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, facing page translation, trans. Terry Pinkard, <http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/phenomenology-of-spirit-page.html>. Changes that I have made to Pinkard's translation are mentioned in the notes. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis is Hegel's own.

The wicked consciousness confesses this realization to the judge, saying "I am he [*Ich bin's*]" (§ 667). In order to understand what this confession entails, it is worth looking carefully at the text:

As [the wicked consciousness] intuits this selfsameness and *gives expression to it*, he *confesses* this to the other, and he equally expects that the other, who has in fact put himself selfsame with him, will reciprocate his *speech* and in his own words will express their selfsameness so that recognitional existence will make its appearance. His confession is not an abasement, nor a humiliation, nor is it a matter of his casting himself aside in his relationship with the other, for this declaration is not something one-sided through which he would posit his non-selfsameness with the other. On the contrary, it is solely in consideration of his intuition of his *selfsameness* with the other that he gives expression to himself, that is, he gives expression on his own part to *their selfsameness* in his confessions, and he does this because language is the *existence* of the spirit as the immediate self. He thus expects that the other will contribute his own part to this existence. (§ 666)

In his confession, the wicked consciousness acknowledges that he, like the judging consciousness, is a particular individual whose actions express his particular commitments. Hegel insists that this confession is "not an abasement, nor a humiliation, nor is it a matter of his casting himself aside;" that is, the confession entails neither the domination of the confessing consciousness by the judging consciousness nor the assimilation of the confessing consciousness into a homogenizing universal consciousness. Rather, the confession expresses the symmetry or "selfsameness" between the two consciousnesses' subjective positions as particular individuals subject to the judgment of others. In this sense, the confession acknowledges that both the wicked consciousness and the judging consciousness are marked by subjectivity and particularity.

The confession acknowledges more than just subjectivity and particularity, however. If it did only that, it would not be an advance over the position that the wicked consciousness initially held. The confession also acknowledges a kind of universality, which is embodied in the speech act of the confession. Hegel emphasizes the linguistic character of the confession, even in his italicization of "gives expression to it," "confesses," and "speech" at the beginning of the section quoted above. When Hegel writes that "language is the existence of the spirit as the immediate self," he suggests that language connects the universal consciousness to the particular individual. Language is universal, in the sense that it is shared by all of the members of a linguistic community, but it lives only in the utterances of particular individuals. According to Hegel, language is the concrete expression of spirit in and through individuals. Judging and confessing are both speech acts that marry universality and particularity in this way.

With his confession, the wicked consciousness overcomes the initial view that his actions could be justified only by his personal and subjective convictions. His confession participates in something that he himself does not

fully control—language—and it responds to the judgment issued by another. By confessing, the wicked consciousness shows that he has given up his view that no one else could have anything to say about his commitments, insofar as he revises his assessment of himself and his action in response to the judgment of the other. In this sense, the confession contains an implicit acknowledgment of the social practices through which individuals' beliefs and actions are judged, challenged, and shaped by others.

The judging consciousness hears the confession of the wicked consciousness, but he does not immediately reciprocate. Hegel writes that this refusal to reciprocate reverses the situation of the two consciousnesses, so that the wicked consciousness now judges the judging consciousness for the latter's failure to acknowledge his symmetry with the former. According to Hegel, the wicked consciousness "sees the judgmental consciousness as somebody who sets his own stiff-necked selfsame character in opposition to the confessing consciousness, and he sees the utter silence of someone who keeps himself locked up within himself, who refuses to be discarded vis-à-vis an other" (§ 667). In further confirmation of the reversed situation, Hegel now describes the judging consciousness as a beautiful soul who cannot reconcile his sense of his own inner purity with his existence in the world. The judging consciousness remains silent and inert. Hegel calls this the "highest rebellion of self-certain spirit," in which the judging consciousness refuses even to "put itself into communication with him . . . who in his confession had already renounced his *separate being-for-itself*" (§ 667). In this way, Hegel writes:

The hard heart shows itself to be the consciousness forsaken by spirit, the consciousness which denies spirit since it does not take cognizance that within its absolute self-certainty, spirit is master over every deed and over all actuality, and that spirit can repudiate them and make them into something that never happened.⁷ At the same time, the hard heart does not take cognizance of the contradiction it commits when it does not count the repudiation that took place *in speech* as true repudiation while it itself has the certainty of its spirit not in an actual action but in its inwardness and has its existence in the *speech* in which its judgment is phrased. It is therefore the hard heart himself who is putting obstacles in the way of the other's return from the deed into the spiritual existence of speech and into the equality of spirit, and by virtue of its hardness of heart, it engenders the disparity which is still present. (§ 667)

The judging consciousness refuses to acknowledge that he is not wholly self-determined, that, in fact, "spirit is master over every deed and over all actuality."

This phrase—"spirit is master over every deed and over all actuality"—stops many readers in their tracks. Taken alone, it seems to provide incontrovertible evidence of both Hegel's supposed spirit monism and his difference-effacing absolutism. A. V. Miller renders the phrase even more

⁷ I have altered Pinkard's translation slightly here, preferring the more literal "is master over" to his "has a mastery over."

worrisome in his well-known translation: "Spirit, in the absolute certainty of itself, is lord and master over every deed and actuality."⁸ Miller's translation, however, misleads us. While the word *Herr* (which Hegel uses in the lord and bondsman section) signifies master in the sense of a lord or ruler, the word that Hegel uses here, *Meister*, signifies master in the sense of an expert craftsman or artisan, a person who has mastered a skill. This conflation in Miller's translation is compounded by the fact that he translates *Herr* in the lord and bondsman section as master rather than lord, creating a linguistic affinity between these two sections that is not present in Hegel's own text. In this passage, spirit is not a lord who dominates or rules, but a master who shapes deeds and actualities. This renders the passage rather similar to the position taken by many contemporary communitarians, pragmatists, Aristotelians, and feminists, among others, that subjects are shaped by their social and historical context, and that the identities, beliefs, and actions available to agents are always constrained by that context. Understood in this way, Hegel's assertion is a corrective to the absolute self-certainty of the hard-hearted judging consciousness. Hegel reminds his reader that whatever determinate content the judging consciousness affirms does not spring wholly from within but comes to it already shaped by spirit, that the apparently universal point of view is secured not by a thing-in-itself but by a community existing over time. Spirit is master over deeds and actuality insofar as spirit provides the social norms, context, and determinate concepts and commitments that make deeds and actuality meaningful to begin with.

The judging consciousness refuses to admit this and, instead, clings to the idea that it can be either "pure being or empty nothingness." As a result, it "becomes unhinged to the point of madness, and it melts into a yearning tubercular consumption. It thereby, in fact, gives up its grim adherence to *its being for itself* but it only manages to engender merely the spiritless *unity of being*" (§ 668). The language here echoes section 658, just before the discussion of confession and forgiveness, in which a so-called beautiful soul wastes away and disappears.

Suddenly, however, the judging consciousness's hard heart breaks and the two consciousnesses achieve reciprocal recognition. Hegel claims that the breaking of the hard heart is conceptually and practically necessary: "the true conciliation, the *self-conscious* and *existing* conciliation, is in terms of its necessity already contained in the preceding" (§ 669). In other words, the movement by which the wicked consciousness comes to acknowledge the necessary relationship between universal consciousness, or spirit, and particular individuality in his action is the same movement by which the judging consciousness comes to acknowledge this relation in his judgment (§ 669).

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 406.

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The judging consciousness sees that the wicked consciousness takes action in the world, the latter subjecting himself and his action to the judgment of the former and then reintegrating this judgment into an account of himself and his action. Or, in Hegel's own words, the wicked consciousness, "which casts its actuality aside, makes itself into a *sublated 'this subject'* and thereby exhibits itself in fact as the universal. It returns from the external actuality back into itself as essence, and the universal consciousness thus takes cognizance of itself therein" (§ 670). The universal consciousness—the judging consciousness—thus sees itself in the wicked consciousness and, seeing this identity, the judging consciousness is finally prepared to forgive the wicked consciousness.

THE SACRAMENTAL FUNCTION OF CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Given the nature of the conflict that Hegel has described, we can expect that reconciliation will follow only if the judging consciousness joins the wicked consciousness in acknowledging their selfsameness and if both individuals actualize this selfsameness in their relationship with one another. These conditions are met when the judging consciousness extends forgiveness to the wicked consciousness. Although Hegel uses the word "forgiveness" [*Verzeihung*] only once in this section, its importance is signaled by its appearance in the section's title ("Conscience: The Beautiful Soul, Evil, and Its Forgiveness") and by its position in a crucial passage that moves swiftly from the breaking of the judging consciousness's hard heart to his extension of forgiveness to the wicked consciousness and, finally, to the emergence of reciprocal recognition and absolute spirit in their midst. Hegel writes:

The forgiveness it extends to the first [i.e. the wicked consciousness] is the renunciation of itself, of its *non-actual* essence, an essence which it equates with this other consciousness which was *actual* action, and it recognizes as good what had been determined in thought to be bad, namely, action; or to an even greater degree, it abandons this distinction between determinate thought and its determinate judgment existing-for-itself, just as the other abandons its own act, which exists-for-itself of determining action. – The word of reconciliation is the *existing* spirit which immediately intuits in its opposite the pure knowledge of itself as the *universal* essence, intuits in it the pure knowledge of itself as *individuality* existing absolutely inwardly—a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* spirit." (§ 670)

C. Allen Speight notes that Hegel's concept of forgiveness combines two ideas: "(1) an overcoming of *resentment* that is based on a *revision of judgment* and (2) a recognition of conditions affecting both agency and judgment in general," such as the fallibility of agents, the self-interest of motives, and the potential for evil.⁹ Both of these ideas are at work in the

⁹ C. Allen Speight, "Butler and Hegel on Forgiveness and Agency," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 2 (2005): 299.

passage above. The judging consciousness's forgiveness of the wicked consciousness revises two previous judgments: the general judgment of action as bad and the specific judgment of the wicked consciousness as wicked for acting on the basis of its particularities. In its forgiveness, the judging consciousness acknowledges human beings' fallibility, the fact that they can be wrong in their judgments and wrong about the content or meaning of their own actions. This fact is as true for itself as for the wicked consciousness. The judgment that it had issued was motivated not only by a respect for universal duty but also by its own particularistic desires and intentions.

Like the confession, the forgiveness is a speech act. Hegel's phrase "the word of reconciliation" can refer literally to the words uttered by the two consciousnesses. Once again, Hegel claims that language is existing spirit or, in other words, that language not only mediates between the particular and the universal, the individual and the community, but also marries the two. Individual commitments become contentful when actions, including speech acts, express those commitments in public, expose them to the judgment of others, and reintegrate them.¹⁰

Focusing only on the linguistic aspects of confession and forgiveness, however, misses the significance of the religious and theological content and context of these practices. Hegel does not discuss just any speech acts, performative utterances, or revisions of judgment. Rather, he specifically focuses on the religiously inflected practices of confession and forgiveness and he uses the theologically rich phrase, the "word of reconciliation." As we will see, to ignore this would be to miss the absolutely crucial, if unorthodox, sense in which confession and forgiveness serve a sacramental function in Hegel's account.

Hegel's discussion of confession and forgiveness draws on and transforms Martin Luther's sacramental theology. In Luther's theology, the sacraments are sacred rituals in and through which God's grace manifests in the community. For Luther, the sacraments represent the divine reality in two senses: first, they symbolize that reality through a visible sign, such as the bread and wine in the Eucharist, and second, they actualize the signi-

¹⁰ Compare Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009), 190–92. In Rose's reading of this passage, Hegel's point is that "words are not actions, that evil, confession and forgiveness are subjective, Christian virtues not ethical ones, and that abstract statements mask ethical actuality" (192). Rose's reading seems to depend on Hegel's earlier discussion of conscience's own account of itself, according to which the affirmation of the other's conviction and the issuance of judgment of another's action do not themselves count as actions that are subject to normative judgment. In my reading, however, Hegel's point in the discussion of confession and forgiveness is that conscience was wrong: words do count as actions. Thus, there is nothing abstract or merely subjective about the acts of confession and forgiveness; both the wicked and judging consciousnesses ultimately recognize that they are in the position of both judge and judged—that is, subject and object—and their speech acts actualize this recognition.

fied reality, as with Christ's real presence in the Eucharistic host.¹¹ In his early writings, Luther counts penance among the sacraments, alongside the Eucharist and baptism. In "The Sacrament of Penance" (1519), Luther insists that penance consists of the three features of all sacraments: visible sign, signified reality, and faith. In the sacrament of penance, Luther identifies these three features as absolution, or the words of forgiveness; grace, or the gift of forgiveness; and faith, or the trust that one has been forgiven. Absolution is the visible sign—the representation—while grace is the signified reality made present in the act, and, finally, "the faith that believes the sacrament is what removes the sin."¹²

We find each of these three features in Hegel's account of confession and forgiveness as well. The absolution, or what Hegel calls "the word of reconciliation," is the visible sign, matched by the signified reality or the forgiveness actualized by the judging consciousness's action. Finally, the reciprocal recognition of the two consciousnesses entails the faith that each one can be (and is) forgiven by the other. Moreover, Hegel follows Luther in his insistence that one must be a penitent in order to participate in the sacrament at all. As Luther writes, "The hardhearted who do not as yet seek comfort for their conscience, have likewise not yet experienced this tormenting anxiety. To them, this sacrament is of no use."¹³ Using the same phrase as Luther [*das harte Herz*], Hegel writes that the hard-hearted judging consciousness must recognize that spirit is master over deed and actuality before it is able to respond to the wicked consciousness's confession and enjoy reconciliation. Of course, as I suggested above, Hegel's spirit is not a lord who rules, but a master who shapes deeds and actuali-

¹¹ In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel explicitly states his preference for the Lutheran account of the Eucharist over against the Catholic and Reformed accounts. According to Hegel, the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation venerates the material host itself, while the Reformed doctrine reduces the Eucharist to its symbolic and memorial functions. The Lutheran position charts a middle course, acknowledging the actual presence of Christ in the bread and wine, made manifest in the act of partaking: "the communion, the self-feeling presence of God, comes about only insofar as the external thing is consumed—not merely physically but in spirit and in faith." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 479–81, quotation at 480. See also Hegel's brief discussion of "repentance or penitence" immediately preceding this. As scholars such as Walter Jaeschke, Cyril O'Regan, and Peter Hodgson have noted in discussions of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel is not endorsing a full-fledged sacramental theology in these pages, at least in any orthodox sense. As O'Regan writes, "Hegel is not so much defending a particular sacramental theology as indicating support for a sacramental principle that may very well apply to all reality" (O'Regan, *Heterodox Hegel*, 243). Or, in Hodgson's words, "[Hegel's] account of historical details is often imprecise, and his emphasis lies on conceptual distinctions that appear in history in a variety of ways" (Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 193). For an excellent discussion of the role of the sacrament of communion in Hegel's work, see Stephen Crites, *In the Twilight of Christendom: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard on Faith and History* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972), 49–51.

¹² Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of Penance," *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

ties. By contrast, Luther's God may be the lord who rules, as he suggests when he writes that the hard-hearted sinner must first be "softened up" with the "terrible judgment of God" before he will "seek for the comfort of this sacrament."¹⁴

In Hegel's account, it is not God but another human being who judges or forgives the one who confesses. In this, Hegel's account echoes Luther's description of public confession and forgiveness among Christians. In the "Exhortation to Confession" (1529), Luther writes that through public confession "we mutually confess our guilt and our desire for forgiveness [Matt. 5:23–24]. Now, all of us are guilty of sinning against one another; therefore we may and should publicly confess this before everyone without shrinking in one another's presence. . . . So we have in the Lord's Prayer a double absolution: there we are forgiven our offenses against God and against our neighbor, and there we forgive our neighbor and become reconciled to him."¹⁵ According to Luther, Christians may confess to and seek forgiveness from not only God or a priest, but also from one another. Similarly, in "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1520), Luther exhorts the Church to "permit all brothers and sisters freely to hear the confession of hidden sins, so that the sinner may make his sins known to whomever he will and seek pardon and comfort, that is, the word of Christ, by the mouth of his neighbor."¹⁶ When Christians confess to and forgive one another, they participate in the work of reconciliation.

Where Luther writes that Christians should publicly confess without "shrinking in one another's presence," we may recall Hegel's claim that the confession is "not an abasement, nor a humiliation, nor is it a matter of casting himself aside." Both Luther and Hegel emphasize the necessity of confession and forgiveness among equally corrigible creatures. Moreover, echoing what Luther calls the "doubled absolution" of the Lord's Prayer, in which the individual and his neighbor are simultaneous cast as both offering forgiveness and being forgiven, the reciprocal recognition of Hegel's wicked and judging consciousnesses entails the acknowledgment that each individual stands in the position of wrongdoer and judge, confessor and forgiver. *Simul iustus et peccator*.¹⁷

The connection between Hegel's discussion of confession and forgiveness and Luther's sacramental theology helps us to understand why Hegel thinks that these particular practices give rise to absolute spirit and what

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, "Exhortation to Confession," available at <http://bookofconcord.org/exhortationConfession.php>. This text originally appeared in the Luther's 1529 edition of the *Large Catechism*. It is included in some, but not all, editions of the *Book of Concord*.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 88.

¹⁷ Luther characterized the state of the Christian as "simul iustus et peccator" (at the same time righteous and a sinner). For Luther, the Christian is not partly righteous and partly sinful, but both, fully and simultaneously—*totus iustus, totus peccator*.

“absolute spirit” entails. For Luther, the sacraments represent the divine, both in the sense of representing or symbolizing as visible sign and in the sense of *re*-presenting or making actual the signified reality.¹⁸ In the Eucharist, for example, Christ is represented by the bread and wine, and actually made present in the community through the sacramental act. In penance, the words of confession and forgiveness serve as visible signs of a reconciliation that is actualized in the ritual. Hegel thinks that Luther gets something right by insisting on the role of confession and forgiveness in the Christian community. Luther’s sacramental theology captures the logical and practical structure of reconciliation—the representation and *re*-representation of the absolute in the sacrament. To engage in the work of reconciliation is to participate in the absolute.

Hegel argues that religion has the same true content as absolute knowledge, but that it grasps this content in a representational form. The content of sacramental theology is human beings’ representation and *re*-representation of the absolute through word and deed, and, thereby, their participation in the work of reconciliation. Hegel’s claims about religion suggest that this is true in representational form. In grasping this content conceptually rather than representationally, however, one recognizes these human words and deeds as constitutive of the absolute itself. The double absolution that Luther highlights in the Lord’s Prayer, in which the individual and his neighbor are both forgiver and forgiven, is understood as the reciprocal recognition in which each individual stands in a potential position of wrongdoer and judge, confessor and forgiver. In sacramental fashion, the wicked and judging consciousnesses’ confession and forgiveness symbolize and actualize the reciprocal recognition “which is *absolute* spirit.”

The truth that Hegel finds in Luther’s sacramental theology is the idea that certain shared practices enable communities to express their deepest commitments while making those commitments actual and present among them. As sacramental practices, confession and forgiveness simultaneously symbolize and actualize “the reciprocal recognition that is absolute spirit,” the self-sufficient standard that encompasses the consciousnesses, their practices, and their relationship. Through their confession and forgiveness, the wicked and judging consciousnesses symbolize in word and actualize in deed their acknowledgment of their own corrigibility. But they also embody their recognition that each stands in this position and that, therefore, the authority of judgments and actions will be generated through the social practices—acting, judging, confessing, forgiving, holding accountable, and granting recognition—in which each one participates.

Earlier, I suggested that Hegel’s goal in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to describe a form of life in which individuals are neither immediately identified with communal norms nor alienated from them. He hopes to describe

¹⁸ I owe this way of putting the point to Ron Thiemann.

the way in which individuals' beliefs and actions can be both self-legislated and accountable to standards outside of themselves. The confession and forgiveness section suggests how Hegel thinks these are reconciled. In both confession and forgiveness, the speech act symbolizes and actualizes the speaker's recognition of the authority of the other. By confessing to and forgiving one another, the two consciousnesses recognize the authority of the other to act, to judge, and to forgive. By recognizing this authority, they also generate it. The self-sufficient standard that generates norms and normative authority, on this account, is embedded in the ongoing practices of acting, judging, confessing, forgiving, holding accountable, and granting recognition. Sacramental practices express, constitute, and embody what Hegel calls absolute spirit—the members of the community, their shared norms, and their practices of reflecting on those norms.

This interpretation of Hegel's concept of absolute spirit neither ignores nor trivializes religion and theology. In fact, it suggests that the logical and practical structure of the sacrament is crucial to understanding the two consciousnesses' movement from alienation to reconciliation. This interpretation, therefore, goes beyond other "nonmetaphysical" or "metaphysically minimalist" interpretations of this section. On Robert Pippin's reading, for example, Hegel's turn to confession and forgiveness turns reciprocal recognition into a contingent outcome. According to Pippin, the possibility of reconciliation is a "spiritual possibility, a quasi-religious 'conversion experience,' in a community: 'forgiveness.'"¹⁹ Pippin's characterization of forgiveness as conversion experience suggests that it is a bolt from the blue, neither philosophically necessary nor conceptually motivated by what came before. Moreover, he claims, there is "no institutional manifestation" in this account of confession and forgiveness, and "very little" that could connect it to the concrete instantiations of spirit described in the *Philosophy of Right*.²⁰ On my reading, however, Hegel's theological language and his allusions to sacramental theology provide the context for understanding reciprocal recognition and reconciliation as practical achievements with a distinct form. When Hegel discusses confession and forgiveness, he is not gesturing toward a vague "spiritual possibility," but describing concrete practices through which the absolute is symbolized and actualized. Moreover, he is directing his readers' attention to the Christian sacraments with which they are likely already familiar. For Hegel's contemporaries, what Pippin refers to as "the option of 'confessing' such guilt to others who we hope will reciprocate," would not appear as thin and contingent as Pippin seems to suggest.²¹

¹⁹ Robert Pippin, "Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualized Agency in Hegel's Jena Phenomenology," in *Hegel: New Directions*, ed. Katerina Deligiorgi (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

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As sacramental practices, confession and forgiveness both symbolize and actualize reciprocal recognition and absolute spirit.

Nevertheless, Hegel's insistence on the distinction between religious representation and philosophical reflection cautions us against importing Luther's sacramental theology into Hegel's philosophy wholesale. While they share the same content, they apprehend this content in distinct ways. Hegel suggests that religion's representation of the absolute, whether in its sacramental theology or in its other doctrines and practices, retains an element of alienation. Only philosophy's reflection on the absolute properly apprehends the absolute as the self-sufficient normative authority emerging from the words and deeds of human beings.

SACRAMENTAL POLITICS

In addition to responding to theological critics of the metaphysically minimalist interpretation of Hegel by attending to Hegel's religious and theological claims, this reading of the confession and forgiveness section has a second important implication. Namely, it suggests that Hegel's concept of absolute spirit cannot entail the difference-effacing or conflict-eliminating end of history that some have assumed. While confession and forgiveness do entail a kind of reconciliation, we should see by now that this reconciliation is not one that ends conflict once and for all. Instead, it is a reconciliation based on the acknowledgment of human beings' corrigibility; it is a reconciliation based on the partiality of perspectives. If reciprocal recognition is absolute spirit, as Hegel states, then all of this particularity, fallibility, and revisability must be part of absolute spirit. And if that is the case, then absolute spirit involves ongoing contestation about which beliefs, actions, and norms are justified.

Rather than collapsing under the weight of contestation, absolute spirit is sustained by social practices that put both conflict and reconciliation at the center of communal life. These practices—which share the sacramental function of confession and forgiveness—characterize absolute spirit; they are the practices of a form of life in which the norms of the community are generated, made present, as individuals participate in creating and sustaining a form of life. In this view, absolute spirit simply cannot involve the kind of homogeneity and closure that some interpreters, such as Adorno, have accused Hegel of promoting.

In a diverse democracy, citizens draw their beliefs from different and, at times, incompatible sources. We are bound to disagree with one another, not only about public policies, but also about right and wrong, about the good and the sacred, and about which people, texts, and traditions count as authoritative when we have to make difficult decisions about contentious ethical dilemmas. Does Hegel's discussion of confession and forgiveness—his sacramental politics—have any relevance for us? I contend that it does.

The confession and forgiveness section can serve as a model for a form of agonistic democratic politics, which acknowledges the persistence of conflict and contestation in social life, while emphasizing the role of shared practices in sustaining the community over time. These practices can create, sustain, or repair relations of reciprocal recognition—relations of self-sameness and of mutual authority and accountability. Like confession and forgiveness, they acknowledge human beings' corrigibility while aiming to create fellowship in a common good.

The shared practices that sustain the diverse community must be those in and through which the norms that define the community are applied, contested, and changed. As Margaret Urban Walker writes, "One way that communities bring themselves into existence, sustain themselves, and define and refine their identities is by the progressive articulation and the enforcement of their norms and of their membership. When individuals take up the role of judges, invoking norms and affirming membership, they make use of something that is common property, the moral authority of a community."²² The social practices of judging, confessing, and forgiving vary according to the community and circumstances. They might include the sacraments in a Christian congregation, democratic sacrifices made by citizens for the sake of their relationships with fellow citizens or the society that they share, or the practices of mutual accountability among members of a broad-based grassroots organization.²³ On both a local and a national scale, we might find practices of restorative justice, which attempt to reweave the moral fabric of a community in the aftermath of violence, domination, or other harms. These practices share Hegel's sacramental politics by emphasizing the work of creating or repairing relationships of reciprocal recognition that have been sundered, in order to regenerate normative authority.²⁴

There is much more work to be done to understand what these practices are in particular communities and how they might be cultivated. I hope that I have given a glimpse into the resources that Hegel provides for that important work.

²² Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

²³ For a discussion of the role that practices of sacrifice play in the building and sustaining of relationships among citizens in a democracy, see Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Jeffrey Stout describes practices of mutual accountability in *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁴ See Walker, *Moral Repair*, esp. 207–18.