

## CONCLUSION TO THE DISSERTATION

The Hegelian dialectic, which has been useful for characterizing the Catholic appropriation of Church tradition, is well illustrated in the Phenomenology of Spirit's parable of the master and the slave.<sup>1</sup> The master, Hegel writes, enjoys a consciousness which exists for itself. In contrast, the slave serves as no more than a means to the master's enjoyment. To the master belongs freedom. To the slave belongs servitude. The consciousness of the slave is consciousness not for itself but for another, to whom the slave is in thrall.

After describing these fundamental relations, Hegel inserts a dialectical twist. The twist is that the master ultimately needs the slave, because the master's desire can only be achieved through the slave's service. Upon the slave the master has come to depend. Similarly the slave, condemned to labor with what the master has given, finds in such labor a measure of self-consciousness. In that labor, the slave puts his or her stamp upon reality, and thus discovers a consciousness which exists for itself. Hegel even goes so far as to conclude that the truth of the independent consciousness is the consciousness of the slave. What seemed to be utterly opposed, the consciousness of master and of slave, is not utterly opposed in Hegel's dialectic. The one pole is shown to be dependent upon the other, and master and slave are so related that we are no longer sure who serves whom.

Intimately linked to the dialectic is Hegel's exposition of what it means to speak of reason in history. This exposition laid the basis for Gadamer's analysis of the historical nature of understanding. The work of Gadamer provided the impetus to our reconsideration of the theology of tradition, a theology which is the Church's effort to come to grips with its own historical nature. To this extent, the Hegelian parable is of consequence for this theology. Within it, Catholic interpreters may seem to be the indentured servants of their own past. Would Hegel not ask whether the Church's teaching on the magisterium as the authoritative exponent of Christian tradition hinders, rather than contributes to, the freedom toward which reason in history tends? Is the magisterium not the cruel master of his parable, expounding the tradition with which the faithful slaves are condemned to labor? Are not Catholics in bondage to an ecclesiastical tradition which restricts their freedom of inquiry?

To these questions, however, we would have to answer with Hegel's own dialectical cunning. Are not the Catholic's labors with tradition, we would ask, a means to achieving self-consciousness? Is not our interpretation of the tradition the placing of our mark upon Christianity? Does not tradition depend upon us to bear it along? And finally, can we not say, with Hegel, that the truth of the independent consciousness is the consciousness of the slave?<sup>2</sup> Hegel would doubtless repudiate the link between himself

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, Phänomenologie, in Werke, 2.153-157; trans., pp. 234-8.

<sup>2</sup> "Die Wahrheit des selbstständigen Bewusstseyns ist demnach das knechtische Bewusstseyn." Ibid., 2.155; trans., p. 237.

and Roman Catholicism. But in his treatment of historical reason, whose dialectical nature the parable of the master and the slave portrays, he offers a philosophical rationale for the theology of tradition. History manifests, according to Hegel, the presence of spirit. The philosophical task is not to sit in judgment upon the past, comparing it unfavorably to the present, but rather to seek its truth and reconcile ourselves to it. Against the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who sought to emancipate themselves from tradition, Hegel proposed the integration of it with the present.

In Part I of this dissertation, we asked how the decline of tradition in the philosophy of the Enlightenment curtailed the understanding of truth. The answer to this question has to do with historical method and the transcendental conditions for it. In terms of method, on the one hand, the past was regarded as an alien object from which one must keep a critical distance for the sake of objectivity. On the other hand, the transcendental conditions for the possibility of method – i.e., the fact that interpreters stand within the history they study – received scant attention. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, and the historicists who succeeded them, failed to see that they were a part of the history from which they sought to free themselves. This impoverished their understanding of the past.

What they lacked was a concept of historical truth. This concept was achieved in the philosophical rehabilitation of tradition by Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer, traced in Part II of the dissertation. Such a concept is the answer to the question of how the rehabilitation of tradition might broaden the understanding of truth. The concept suggests that the temporal situation of the interpreter is far from a mere hindrance to an imagined objectivity. Rather, it allows the discovery of new perspectives and manifests historical being no less than the interpretation itself. If the philosophic decline of tradition coincided with its banishment to the realm of prejudice, the rehabilitation of it has been due to the acknowledgment of the interpreter's participation in the very history to be interpreted.

Such an acknowledgment accords well with the so-called modern theology of tradition, although that theology rarely reflected on the historical contingency of the concepts of the knowing subject. Catholicism has never pretended that its basis is an impartial survey of first-century events by means of historical criticism. On the contrary, the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition arose in Catholic theology in order to separate the claims of the Church and of scientific history. Theology distinguished between active and objective tradition to show that those who transmit tradition are themselves a part of it. And the Scriptures were denied formal sufficiency by the theology of tradition because their truth could not be divorced from its interpretation. These concerns of the modern theology of tradition, which was expounded in Part III of the dissertation, suggest an answer to the question of that theology's meaning and purpose. While it paid little heed to the historical nature of understanding, insisting rather on the immutability of the Church, this theology preserved tradition as a subject for scholarly inquiry. It underlined the link between tradition and history, and clung to the realization that there is no understanding of tradition outside of tradition.

Part IV of the dissertation applied to this theology the understanding of historical truth achieved by the philosophical rehabilitation of tradition. It explored the following question: how can one avoid implying the relativism of Christianity when speaking of historical truth in theology? The answer lies in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The Gadamerian analyses suggest that the unexpressed presuppositions of faith do not disqualify the assertions of theology. Instead, they provide their very context. Such a context, while remaining largely unspoken, is indirectly refined in the explicit teachings of the Church. Although the Catholic theologian acknowledges the authority of the media of revelation, this acknowledgment does not curtail the truth of theology. Such theology seeks not to efface its historical roots, but to plumb them ever more deeply. Philosophical hermeneutics contributes to the theology of tradition a deepened insight into its own historical being. That is why Catholic hermeneutics is our term for the Catholic understanding of Christian tradition.

Such an understanding is not impersonal but Catholic. It abandons all pretensions to independence and neutrality. The interpreter of the Church's tradition is indeed the slave of Hegel's parable, condemned to labor with the magisterium's authoritative definitions of doctrinal tradition. To be sure, the magisterium depends upon the faithful, and the Catholic interpreter finds in servitude what Hegel called a consciousness which exists for itself. But the truth of the independent consciousness is the consciousness of the slave. Indeed, the magisterium is itself a slave of tradition, for all Christians are under the same sentence. But such a sentence is not insupportable. Even Jesus Christ, in the words of the Letter to the Philippians, emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave.