

Faith with Reason: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

The Pessimistic Alternative

Justice requires that the good be rewarded and the wicked punished. But at the same time, achieving the reward or avoiding the punishment cannot be the motive for performing acts of goodness without undermining the essential, inner nature of morality itself. The good person does her duty for the sake of duty, not for the sake of a reward or to avoid a punishment. The prospect of reward is generally uncertain, while in the moment the sacrifice of some present pleasure or interest is required by the pressing requirements of moral duty. And yet the larger goal of moral endeavor is to create a world in which the good are rewarded and the wicked punished. Is this goal, which Kant called the Highest Good, a realizable ideal or a hopeless and impossible fantasy? According to old Sol, in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, both the Bible and Shakespeare affirm the moral nature of our world, in which crime is ultimately punished and good people do indeed live happy lives. This is the also the vision of Hollywood movies such as *The Matrix Trilogy* and *Star Wars*, as well as popular TV series such as *The Simpsons* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

But against these optimistic visions of the ultimate triumph of human goodness over evil, there is a profoundly pessimistic strain in the history of philosophy, as in the philosophy of Hobbes, according to which human beings are so entrenched in egotistical evil that only the external force of a fear-inspiring State can prevent them from demolishing one another. Hobbes' philosophy was a secularized expression and parallel formulation of his understanding of the Christian religion. For Christianity, as Hobbes understood it, only the God-man, Jesus Christ, by

sacrificing himself on the cross, could save humanity from its entrenched sinfulness. Such is also the central idea of Mel Gibson's very popular film, *The Passion of the Christ*. In this film, which vividly expresses a certain orthodox Christian theology, evil has so triumphed over mankind that only a superhuman being, a God-Man, can free humanity from the clutches of the Evil One, and raise it from the depths to which it has sunk. We have seen that *The Matrix Trilogy* poses the question of the Savior through the actions of "the One." Is "the One" a Savior who liberates humanity from its shackles, or a Teacher who shows people how to liberate themselves? All the while providing parallels with the Christian model, the *Matrix Trilogy* take a clear position against the conception of the external Savior who liberates mankind from its imprisonment by evil powers through his super-human abilities and ultimate self-sacrifice. This is however the very type of Savior that Mel Gibson presents Jesus to have been. This conception of the external Savior presupposes a certain logic of justice rooted in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament of the Christians.

The Trials of Job

A Biblical theory of justice is presented with much philosophical nuance and depth in the *Book of Job*. Satan, whose name means the Adversary, comes before the throne of God announcing humanity's widespread dereliction of God's laws. Evil is everywhere. But there is still one good man, God replies, his faithful servant Job. One good man is enough in God's eyes to justify mankind as a whole. Satan, however, has a response: for his faithful adherence to the divine commands Job is richly rewarded with family and flocks. Let me afflict him with sorrow and suffering, and then watch him recant his so-called morality. Paradoxically, it is Satan who here

affirms the purity of morality by arguing that any performance of moral or religious duty that is motivated by concern for rewards and punishments is not true morality. God agrees with this assessment and allows Satan to put Job's morality to the test by depriving him of his wealth, his family, and eventually his health. His friends, finding him so sorely struck down with loss and illness, are appalled. What have you done to bring such misery upon yourself? Your sins must have been great indeed, they charge. But Job protests his innocence before the all-seeing eyes of God:¹

And this was a man that had bound his eyes over by covenant; never should even his fancy dwell upon the thought of a maid! Well I knew that God Almighty in high heaven would have neither part nor lot with me else; ruin for the sinner his doom is, disinheritance for the wrong-doer. ... When I gazed on the sun in all its splendour, on the moon in her royal progress, did these things steal my heart away, so that mouth kissed hand in adoration? That were great wrong done, to deny the God who is higher than all.

Job is faithful above all to the code of monotheism that condemns pagan worship of the splendors of creation and affirms sexual purity in the face of the rites of spring that were practiced by the neighboring polytheistic agricultural peoples. "Have wiles of woman entangled my heart; did I lie in wait under my neighbor's window?"² He is also a fair dealer when it comes to commercial exchanges: "Walk I by crooked ways, run I eagerly after false dealing, he can weigh my offence with true scales; let God himself bear witness to my innocence!"³ The scales of justice, borrowed from the trader's craft, are perfectly balanced in Job's eyes. Why then does he suffer? For Job there are only two possibilities: either he has committed wrong, or God

himself must be unjust. Having rejected the first of these options, he bitterly concludes that the second must be the case: “Why does he look on and laugh, when the unoffending, too, must suffer? So the whole world is given up into the power of wrong-doers; he blinds the eyes of justice. He is answerable for it; who else?”⁴ We previously considered this passage at the beginning of our chapter on Woody Allen’s multileveled examination of justice in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

It is important to note that Job’s conception of justice is thoroughly worldly. There is no question of an otherworldly reward. Job does not look forward to better things in an afterlife, for this earthly life is the only one for him:⁵

Bethink thee, Lord, it is but a breath, this life of mine, and I shall look on this fair world but once; when that is done, men will see me no more, and thou as nothing. Like a cloud dislimned in passing, man goes to his grave never to return, never again the home-coming, never shall tidings of him reach the haunts he knew. And should I utter no word?

There is of course another possibility—Professor Levy’s atheistic philosophy according to which “the universe is a pretty cold place.” If there is supposed to be only one God who is both good and just, as the monotheistic religions affirm, then the suffering of the innocent is argument against the very existence of God. Such a position is unthinkable to Job. Like old Sol, you can use logic on him all day long and he will still believe in the existence of God. But Job has enough logic that he cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of innocent people when he knows they are innocent. And he knows that he himself is an innocent man. He therefore takes an even harsher view of the universe than Professor Levy. It is worse than a cold place; it is the playground of an evil God.

Having heard this withering denunciation, God then, with great display of power, joins Job in verbal combat:⁶

Then, from the midst of a whirlwind, the Lord gave Job his answer: Here is one that must ever be clouding the truth of things with words ill considered! Strip, then, and enter the lists; it is my turn to ask questions now, thine to answer them. From what vantage point wast thou watching, when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, whence comes this sure knowledge of thine? Tell me, since thou art so wise, was it thou or I designed earth's plan, measuring it out with the line? How came its base to stand so firm; who laid its corner-stone? To me, that day, all the morning stars sang together, all the powers of heaven uttered their joyful praise. Was it thou or I shut in the sea behind bars? No sooner had it broken forth from the womb than I dressed it in swaddling-clothes of dark mist, set it within bounds of my own choosing, made fast with bolt and bar; Thus far thou shalt come, said I, and no further; here let thy swelling waves spend their force.

Thus is Job chastened. Who is he to match wits with the Creator of the universe? How should he measure God's ways with his own puny scales of justice—the God whose power is greater than the mighty seas and whose mercy is shown in the very steadiness of the earth under our feet? “I have spoken as fools speak,” Job finally confesses, “of things far beyond my ken.”⁷ With this admission of the transcendence of God and the mysteriousness of God's ways, Job successfully passes the test to which he has been put. He is rewarded with twice what he lost, lives on to one hundred and forty years, and dies the beloved patriarch of a great family of his descendents. The justice of God, elevated beyond a simplistic theory of crime and punishment,

has thus been demonstrated in the case of the good man Job who nevertheless suffers. Morality too has been vindicated. We must do what is right, remaining confident of the ultimate triumph of justice, despite short-term evidences that would seem to contradict such an outcome. Suffering is thus a trial that proves the metal of one's goodness, while justice is shown in the end with the deserved happiness of the moral hero.

The Suffering Servant of Isaiah

There is one glaring flaw in this argument. What should be said of the innocent servant of God who suffers unto death? What if the good person dies in the midst of his trial without any reward in sight? Isaiah describes the suffering servant of God:⁸

Despised and rejected of men;

A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...

he was despised, and we esteemed him not....

We did esteem him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

So did the "friends" of Job look on him as stricken by God, but justly so, they thought, because of Job's own transgressions against divine law. In this case, however, the afflicted man is indeed afflicted by God, but not for his own sins. He is stricken down for the offenses of others. And as a result, a sinful people finds salvation:

But he was wounded for our transgressions;

He was crushed for our iniquities;

Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

And with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned every one to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The writer is referring to the sufferings of the prophets, such as was Isaiah himself. They protest against the injustices of kings and tyrants, as well as of the abuse of man by man, and suffer the consequences honestly and forthrightly with their own death. They willingly accept both suffering and death as the inevitable price they must pay for confronting powerful rulers who benefit from a world of inequality and so are afraid of their teachings regarding human equality, love, and forgiveness. There is no real difference here from the case of Socrates who is sentenced to death for boldly challenging the authorities of his own time.

There is in this passage implicit reference to traditional Jewish rites of atonement. On the day of atonement (Yom Kippur) as described in the *Book of Leviticus*, one bull and two young goats are selected to be sacrificed, the bull to be a burnt offering, one of the scapegoats to be slaughtered, the other sent out to the desert. Regarding the latter, Aaron the high priest⁹

must put both hands on its head, confessing all the sins and transgressions and faults Israel has committed, and laying the guilt of them on its head. And there will be a man standing ready to take it into the desert for him; so the goat will carry away all their sins into a land uninhabited, set at large in the desert.

The sins of the people are thereby symbolically placed on the innocent scapegoat and, with appropriate ritual and repentant feeling, the sins are atoned through such acts. Whether at one time this ritual was understood magically as itself performing the saving sacrament of atonement, it came generally to be understood as an external symbol for an inner act of repentance. God

does not really need the slaughtered animal. He wants the minds and hearts of human beings, where the true turning from evil must take place.

Isaiah evokes this symbolism by describing the suffering prophet in the role of the scapegoat—the innocent lamb of God who is led to the slaughter:¹⁰

He was oppressed and he was afflicted,
Yet he opened not his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter...
He was cut off out of the land of the living,
Stricken for the transgression of my people....
There was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;
He has put him to grief.

It is God's will for a just world that the prophet upholds as he upbraids the people for their waywardness, their oblivion of fundamental truths of human kinship. For this he must inevitably suffer the consequences of his protest brought upon him by vengeful and frightened people.

Ultimately, however, he will be justly rewarded for his efforts. But how is that possible in the context Jewish this-worldliness? Murdered for his protest against an unjust society, he has no chance of living on like Job for one hundred and forty years and dying in the bosom of great and a loving family. How could otherworldly bliss for himself mean anything to the prophet who strives for justice in *this* world? *Isaiah* therefore pictures the spirit of the deceased prophet looking down on earth and enjoying the triumph of his cause—the victory of his followers in creating a just and loving world, the final happiness of Zion, the Kingdom of God on earth:

He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many;
for he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore will I divide him a portion with the greater,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he hath poured out his soul unto death ...
and he bare the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

It may have been with such an understanding that the prophet John the Baptist, himself about to be slain for telling truth to power, points out his successor Jesus to his disciples, saying “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”¹¹

There is nothing in these understandings to suggest that the suffering servant literally pays for the sins committed by others through his own suffering. He points out the sins committed by his fellows, as well as by the rulers they blindly uphold, and for this he suffers the inevitable consequences of telling the truth. He does his duty and suffers for it, as is the way of things in a world governed largely by egotism. By his teaching and example, he calls the people back from their betrayal of moral truth, and leads them to the creation of a more just society. His spirit lives on to rejoice in the spectacle of the triumph of the cause he inspired.

Leading the Lamb to the Slaughter

However, a radically different interpretation, following the doctrine of the Council of Nicea (325 CE), takes literally the metaphor of the scapegoat, and sees Jesus, the unique Son of God, of the same divine substance as the Father, taking on his shoulders the sins of mankind and suffering all the punishment that is due to a sinful humanity. Later Christians, identifying the suffering servant of *Isaiah* with Jesus, would interpret these passages literally: God's justice demands punishment for sin. But mankind is so given over to evil that were the evil justly punished mankind as a whole would be eternally doomed. God therefore spares the sinners by sending his own son to bear on his shoulders the weight of sin, and suffer the punishment himself. Through faith in this act of redemption, humanity then has access to divine forgiveness.

Looking back on the history of the Jewish people the philosopher Levy in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* laments the story of the Bible in which God demands that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. This shows, Levy concludes, that we have been unable to imagine a truly loving God. But according to the interpretation of the Nicene Creed, the God of Christianity is willing to sacrifice his own son to the harsh requirements of his own merciless justice. As a Jew, Woody Allen discretely confines his indictment to his own religious tradition.

According to the orthodox Christian theology of the Nicene Creed, then, God the Father sent his only begotten son into the world to atone for the sins of mankind. For God is a just God, and justice demands punishment for sin. But God is also merciful, loving. So instead of punishing humanity for its sinfulness, as we deserve, he sent a substitute, an innocent sinless being, his own son, to be punished on our behalf. Thus the demand for justice is satisfied, and God's loving mercy for humanity is simultaneously expressed. For this logic of atonement, the more innocent the victim, the greater is the sacrifice, and so the more sins are expiated. It follows that the

harsher, the more barbaric and brutal the punishment actually inflicted, the greater is the benefit in terms of the economics of salvation, where sin is bought back and redeemed at the price it demands.

How appropriate then, as the religious imagination soars on the wings of this blood-thirsty rationality, to suppose the most sadistic forms of violent torture inflicted by the most degraded specimens of human sinfulness! And so in *The Passion of the Christ* Mel Gibson does not spare his audience one drop of blood, one sliver of flesh, in his unflinching portrait of God's love for humanity. As if the punishment described in the Gospels were not enough, we see Jesus brutalized from the moment of his arrest and then plummeting over a bridge until his chains violently break his fall. As if the scourging of Jesus with ordinary whips were not enough, Mel Gibson adds razor blades to the humanly impossible torture. Not only is Jesus nailed to the cross, but the heavy cross falls so that now flesh-rending nails instead of gentler chains break his fall.

In exemplifying this theology, *The Passion of the Christ* draws a stunning portrait of the darkest side of the human soul. It depicts all the depravity, the malice, and the meaninglessness of what the religious imagination of a certain cast understands by sin. So we see a sinister Satan lurking behind scenes in which Goodness Himself is systematically, unequivocally, thoroughly, and completely desecrated and destroyed. As the sun is covered by black storm clouds at the moment of Christ's death, evil triumphs over good, darkness shuts out the light. Or so it seems.

And yet it was all for nothing. Satan's efforts were counterproductive, so that in the end we see him screaming uncontrollably in a fit of fury and frustration. The insane frenzy of punishment produces the opposite of what was intended. Jesus rises from the dead, whole in the flesh once again, except for a stigmatized body to remind his followers that what took place was

not a dream. If the film, in its exhaustive depiction of the passion of the Christ, leaves little to the imagination, its final scene is a brilliant stroke of understatement. The solitary Savior sets out from his tomb with an uncanny expression of purposeful endeavor. The propitiation has been accomplished. He must now announce the achievement to his followers, so that they can bring the Good News to humankind: The sinner is no longer mired in his sin as long as he recognizes the means of his salvation, the terrible price that has been paid as his ransom from the maggoty stench of Satan's maw. Each drop of blood that was shed, which seemed only to deepen the pit of wickedness which humanity digs for itself, fills the chalice of communion with the Savior for whomever will drink of it. Although wholly sunk in unworthiness, the sinner who washes his sins in the blood of the lamb is raised to the highest heaven.

Hegel on the Death of God

In 1789, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) entered the Protestant Seminary at Tübingen University in the German state of Württemberg with the goal of becoming a pastor or perhaps a theologian of the Lutheran Church. Under the powerful influence of the French Revolution, he and his friends and fellow seminarians, Johann Hölderlin (1770-1843) and Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), became fervently caught up in the revolutionary movements for liberating Germany from despotic government in alliance with a corrupt Church interested primarily in sanctifying the privileges of wealth and power. In his on-going effort to comprehend the historical events of his time, Hegel sought the roots of this corruption in a distortion of the real teachings of Christianity, which he understood as truly manifested in the principles of liberty, equality, and brother-and-sisterhood which inspired the French Revolution.

Although Hegel abandoned his initial plan of becoming a pastor for the career of a university professor, he continued throughout his life to deepen his goal of reconciling Christianity with revolutionary French Enlightenment ideals of a community founded on freedom and equality, and fully in accord with the higher requirements of dialectical rationality.

Central to this goal was the critique of feudal and medieval ideas of hierarchical political systems and their alliance with hierarchically organized religion. Hegel understood the theological revolution of Martin Luther (1483-1546) to be a radical critique of an external Savior, and of the institution of religion as an indispensable mediator between God and a fallen, sinful humanity. The fundamental theological justification of this hierarchical religion is the notion of the radical separation of Creator and creature, of God and humanity. To overcome this separation, a God-man is required to mediate between God and fallen humanity. And when that Savior returns to Heaven after enacting the saving sacrifice of his flesh and blood, the Church takes his place on earth as the indispensable means of salvation from the threat of eternal damnation. The theology of atonement thus underpins the hierarchical power of the priesthood over the laity, with all the potentiality for abuse that this implies. The greatest abuse, for Hegel, is that directed to human intelligence itself.¹²

It is not the degradation but the exaltation of the human spirit, expressed in Luther's conception of the priesthood of the laity, that is in fact the deep meaning of Christianity. Christianity rejects the notion of an unattainable deity and the separation of God and humanity in its astounding portrait of God becoming a human being and dying the wretched death of a criminal on the cross. In his *Lectures on The Philosophy of Religion* (1827), Hegel reflects on the Christian doctrine of "the death of God":¹³

“God himself is dead,” it says in a Lutheran hymn, expressing an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves moments of the divine, that they are within God himself, that finitude, negativity, otherness are not outside of God and do not, as otherness, hinder unity with God.”

Hegel calls the Christian vision of the death of God “a monstrous, fearful picture [*Vorstellung*], which brings before the imagination the deepest abyss of cleavage.”¹⁴ The cleavage or separation of God and humanity culminates in Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁵ While suggesting the monstrous, fearful picture presented by *The Passion of the Christ*, Hegel develops an alternative interpretation to the traditional theology of the atonement.

According to Hegel, the central teaching of Christianity is that Jesus is both God and man, both human and divine.¹⁶ He emphasizes Jesus’ statement in the *Fourth Gospel*: “I and the Father are one.”¹⁷ The death of Jesus must therefore be the death of God. But instead of separating Jesus as the divine God-Man from the rest of humanity, as the orthodox theology of atonement maintains, this doctrine serves instead to elevate humanity as a whole from its false conception of separation from God to the same oneness proclaimed by Jesus. Accused of blasphemy in asserting his oneness with God, Jesus replies, according to the *Fourth Gospel*: “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods?’”¹⁸ He who believes in Jesus, i.e., he who understands and puts into practice what he teaches, knows that he too is one with the Father. And so the human being with all her seeming weakness, all his abysmal negativity, is a “moment of the divine.”

In an interview for *Hollywood Jesus News*, Mel Gibson affirms both the theology of atonement and the death of God:¹⁹

There is no greater hero story than this one, about the greatest love one can have, which is to lay down one's life for someone. The Passion is the biggest adventure story of all time. I think it's the biggest love-story of all time; God becoming man and men killing God. If that's not action, nothing is.... Christ paid the price for all our sins.

But what can it possibly mean to say that God died on the cross? We have outlined two conceptions of the death of Jesus. There is the theology of atonement which informs *The Passion of the Christ* according to which the sacrifice of the Son of God redeems a sinful humanity. And there is Hegel's quite different conception that if the man Jesus is truly God, then humanity itself, the human species to which Jesus belongs, must be fundamentally one with God. The crucifixion of Jesus then epitomizes the depth of darkness to which a human being can fall, and consequently, humanity, despite and within all the negativity we are capable of experiencing, constitutes a "moment ... within God himself."

Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith

Hegel's alternative conception of Christianity is based on his distinctive theory of the relation between faith and reason. Contrasting Hegel's conception of the relation of reason and faith with that of the Hegel's later critic, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), will help clarify Hegel's position.

For most ordinary Christians focusing on these images of the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, this core teaching of Christianity is an unfathomable mystery. How the infinite God can be at the same time a finite human being baffles ordinary rationality. Instead of trying to comprehend the mystery, the pious Christian normally attempts to *feel* its

meaning, to experience it awe-inspiring power. Like the Luke in *Star Wars*, she puts aside her ordinary rationality with its either/or logic and attempts to feel something that is evoked by this paradoxical idea that the finite human can be one with the infinite divine.

Kierkegaard seems at first to support this essentially non-rational, emotional nature of ordinary religious piety. However, he does so in the context of attacking a theology which represents Christianity as a doctrine that is addressed primarily to the rational intellect. Against such a theology, Kierkegaard therefore maintains that belief in the unity of divine and human in Jesus requires a surpassing of all logic and all reason, a leap of faith. The radical replacement of reason by faith, Kierkegaard argues, is the very heart of religion. Reason separates and compartmentalizes according to a logic of “either-or.” There is either God or man—there cannot be both. Here is God—the infinite, the all-powerful, the absolute—and here is the human—the finite, the impotent, the negative. Logic formulates the matter clearly: there is A and not-A, the divine and the non-divine, i.e., the wretched human, the almost nothing by comparison with the everything of God. But Christianity teaches that, in Christ, A is indeed identical with non-A. In this core Christian doctrine, therefore, the fundamental law of reason, the law of non-contradiction, is flagrantly violated. To be a Christian, then, logic must be utterly transcended by a leap of faith.

Kierkegaard sees himself as the gadfly of the contemporary “Christendom” of his time, in both its practical aspects and in its theological doctrine. In practice, there is nothing in the comfortable lifestyles of the churchmen of his time to suggest the sacrificial path of worldly renunciation found in the example of Jesus himself. The theology in vogue, heavily influenced by Hegel, was similarly complacent, giving the impression that there is nothing in Christianity

that a rational individual could not accept. Kierkegaard pitted himself especially against this “Hegelian” understanding. Do Christians who hear the words of their faith recognize how thoroughly they contradict the rationality that guides them in everyday life? Such rationality may guide us in the sphere of moral obligations, as Kant argues. But religious faith requires that we leap beyond logic and the universal laws of reason, including the laws of morality. Religious faith instead is about the unutterably singular—the meeting with God where no general rule can guide us. When God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham does not flinch from undertaking what in the eyes of morality is the most despicable act of murder, that of one’s own beloved son. When this story is intoned from the pulpit on a Sunday, how many who hear the words really listen to what is being said, and so become fully aware of the intellectual scandal that is posed by their faith?

The philosopher Levy, we can add, clearly recognizes this scandal, and chooses reason instead of such a scandalous faith. He therefore rejects the very notion of a God who could command such a foul deed. Mitigating the scandal, of course, is the fact that this God does not oblige Abraham to carry out the murder. Bringing the knife to his son’s throat is enough to prove his faith. Abraham passes the test, and the audience to this story is relieved with the happy ending. In Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and his Brothers*, the favored son Joseph comes across his distraught father, Jacob, and asks him why he is so sorrowful. Jacob replies that he has been thinking about the great story his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. He doesn’t believe that his faith is as strong as that of Abraham, he sighs. If God were to command him now to kill Joseph, he doesn’t think he could do it. Joseph consoles his unhappy father. Don’t worry, father, I’m sure you could, he replies tenderly.

Isn't it an even greater scandal to all reason and morality, Kierkegaard asks, for God to sacrifice His own Son—and this time with no scapegoat available as a substitute, no obvious reward forthcoming as the result of passing such a test of faith, as was the case in the Old Testament story. And so the question, Who killed Christ? has only one answer: God Himself, the Father who sent his only Son to the slaughterhouse. The fact that God knows that his divine Son is immortal does not to lessen the sacrifice, the pain, the negativity, the real death, for the Son is also, incomprehensibly, a fully human being.

Hegel on the Relation between Faith and Reason

Although Kierkegaard directed much of his exposition of the nature of religion against Hegel's earlier thought, it is debatable which of the two philosophers was more ready to emphasize the idea that the central teachings of Christianity are a stumbling block to ordinary rationality. When Hegel says that the death of Jesus equals the death of God, and, perhaps slyly, cites a Lutheran hymn as evidence of the theological orthodoxy of this assertion, he recognizes that ordinary rationality must find such a notion incomprehensible. But for Hegel there is no leap of faith into the abyss of intellectual blackness, or blinding light—the two are equivalent. For Hegel, the images proposed by Christianity contain profound truths that the rational human mind, on its own level, is capable of appreciating and comprehending. Such rationality does not however *replace* the distinctly religious level of feeling and imagination, as Kierkegaard supposed, based on the writings of the Danish theologians he criticized. The philosophical understanding of Christianity that Hegel proposes parallels and complements, but does not substitute for, the proper domain of religion which appeals to a different level of consciousness. To grasp in

conceptual terms the truth that Christian religion presents at the level of feeling and imagination, it is indeed necessary to go beyond ordinary logic and the metaphysics of reality that is closely linked to such logic. But beyond this ordinary logic of what Hegel calls “the abstract understanding” there is a higher form of reason linked to a more flexible, more real and living logic—the dialectical logic of the movement of forms of human existence that both contradict and yet logically require one another.

The Christian religion—indeed all religion—takes us beyond ordinary logic, the logic that regulates the operations of the empirical sciences and related technologies. So science and religion seem inevitably to be in conflict. Theologians and scientists may find some common ground in considering such matters as whether or not God created the universe in the Big Bang. But what can the scientist say to the Christian teaching that this same God who could produce a universe became an individual human being and died on a cross to redeem sinful humanity? Surely Hegel and Kierkegaard are right in focusing on the unintelligibility of this notion for the ordinary logical mind.

And yet, in our scientific age the thinking mind becomes ever more insistent on its own right to explore all aspects of consciousness and human experience. This requirement of reason opens up the possibility of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of religious consciousness in the supposition that religious teachings are directed to the intellect, rather than being addressed to feeling and imagination. Science nevertheless poses a legitimate demand to find intelligibility even in areas of experience where non-rational forms of consciousness predominate. So there can be a philosophy of art without supposing that art is something essentially rational. And there can be a philosophy of religion, without attempting to replace religion with reason.

Traditionally, the problem of the relation between faith and reason has been solved by drawing a line somewhere and saying, up to this point we have the sphere of reason, and beyond this we have truths that are made accessible to us only by revelation. But if you can't make any sense of these teachings of revelation, what does it mean to believe in them? If you don't really know *what it means* to say that God has become human and dies the death of a criminal, how can you accept this incomprehensible idea on faith? If someone whom you regard as reliable tells you that he has seen flying saucers, you understand what he means by this and so you can decide whether or not to accept what he says as a revelation for you. But if the revelation involves a logical contradiction, implying that A and not-A are one and the same, what can it mean to accept this on faith? This is what Christian doctrine appears to be saying in affirming the oneness of God and humanity, of the divine and the non-divine, in the person of Jesus. Kierkegaard holds that this is in fact the very point of Christianity. By presenting us with the rationally unintelligible contradiction of A or not-A, it provides a springboard beyond reason into the arms of a transforming, reason-obliterating life of faith. Kierkegaard gives expression to a Christian tradition going back to Tertullian, who, in combat with the pagan rationalistic philosophers as well as Gnostic Christians, exulted in the very unintelligibility of Christian doctrine: *Credo quia absurdum*. I must believe in it, because this is something that is absurd for purely rational understanding.

Hegel agrees that religion is not something rational. It operates through images or “picture thinking” rather than through concepts. Its main appeal is not to the intellect but to the emotions. The faithful Christian *feels* the infinity of God—the melting of the finite into the infinite, of the individual personality into the All—and projects this feeling into the images portrayed visibly

and tangibly by religion. So religious devotion is expressed in such practices as meditating on the Stations of the Cross where the believer reenacts for himself the dissolution of the finite personality by emotionally identifying with the images of the suffering and death of Jesus. It is in such a frame of mind that the ordinary believing Christian approaches *The Passion of the Christ*. In this amalgam of feeling and imagination there are no logical or conceptual difficulties to be surmounted—contrary to what Kierkegaard requires for authentic religion. The religious person does not raise logical problems because she does not think rationally about her faith in the first place, but engages in a radically different form of consciousness—primarily that of feeling. The human being is not merely a rational being, but also a being of feeling as well as of imagination. We do not demand a rational formulation of the lines of a poem, and neither should we do so of religion. To do either is to destroy the integrity of the distinctive forms of awareness.

For Hegel ordinary religious faith does not need the mental gymnastics recommended by Kierkegaard—i.e., beginning with reason, becoming aware of the contradictions involved, and then using the contradiction as a springboard to faith. Ordinary religious belief is a radically different form of consciousness from that of mental or rational thought. In the religious consciousness feeling is connected with thinking in images—not in the concepts of the rational mind. For most believers the doctrines of theology are labels for images that engender feeling, not concepts to be reflected upon by the rational mind. There is therefore a basic misunderstanding of religious consciousness in Kierkegaard's idea that the individual must first consider the teachings of religion from a logical perspective in order to leap beyond logic to a reason-shattering religious consciousness.

As Hegel says above, Christianity first presents a monstrous “picture” [*Vorstellung*] of the death of God. Religious consciousness operates through images or “picture thinking” rather than through concepts. Its main appeal is not to the intellect but to the emotions. The faithful Christian *feels* the infinity of God, and thereby emotionally enacts the melting of the finite into the infinite, of the individual personality into the All. The images of religion both foster and reflect such feeling. Similarly, through imagination and feeling, the Christian believer who attends a showing of *The Passion of the Christ* relives for himself the dissolution of the finite personality into the infinity of the divine by identifying with the images of the suffering and death of Jesus. Perhaps above all the film’s depiction of the *Mater Dolorosa*, the sorrowing mother of Jesus, invites us to identify with the suffering Jesus through a mother’s love, so anxious to avoid any harm to her child, yet compelled to accompany him helplessly on this gruesome journey. All the egotistical concerns of the separate personality dissolve in a mother’s love that knows no limits. This is not a matter of doctrine about the separation of God and man and the need for a Savior, but a feeling, an experience—the experience of oneness with infinite motherly love which Christianity tells us is the real meaning of God.

Reflective consciousness however balks at the theoretical interpretation of this picture that is given by the doctrine of atonement. What kind of mother would send her own son to such a death? As a work of art, Mel Gibson’s film invites us to *identify* with Jesus as the good son of his loving mother, a talented carpenter who is proud of his work, a man who sees through a hierarchical society’s hypocritical condemnation of the prostitute to the beautiful soul of Mary Magdalene and thereby recognizes her own real worth. Above all we identify with Jesus as a being of flesh and blood like ourselves, and so we cringe with every flailing stroke of the whip.

But the theology of atonement puts Jesus on a pedestal and deifies him in a realm utterly apart from us, the audience. This theoretical *understanding* implicitly obstructs our identification with the action hero Jesus that the film wants us to *feel* and conflicts with the requirements of both art and religion.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the first Christian apologist of the dawn of modern science, said that “[t]he heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.”²⁰ Pascal contrasts the emotional sphere of the heart with the mental sphere of reason and at the same time points to another kind of rationality that is intrinsically connected to the feelings of the heart. Hegel attempts to develop just such a heart-felt form of rationality through his conception of dialectical reason that explores the multiform phenomena of consciousness. Dialectical reason is capable of taking us into spheres of consciousness that are off-limits to ordinary rationality with its logic of either A or not-A. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* takes us into spheres of consciousness where contradictions are rife yet meaningful, transformative impulses to growth from limited to more comprehensive perspectives.

On the Separation of Creator and Creation

From the point of view of ordinary logic, the unity of God and not-God is not comprehensible, to be sure. But so, argues Hegel, is their separation. If there is a created world outside of God, then God cannot be infinite. If there is something that is not-God—the finite, limited world of mortal creatures—then God too must be a finite being who is *other than* what is not Him—other than, for example, a finite human being condemned to die.²¹

A God outside of the world may be very large, very powerful, far more than the world He creates, but He remains one distinct finite being along side all the rest. This is how the ancient polytheists pictured their gods—bigger, more powerful than the humans they lord over, but otherwise finite beings just as we are. To say that there is only one such Over-Lord does not change the substance of the matter. But this view rejects the commonly held Christian notion that God is *infinite*. If God is infinite, the unbounded totality of all that is, there can be nothing outside of God. The orthodox theologian who insists on the separation of God and the world, and so the need for an external mediator and a caste of priests to save us, fails to go beyond the level of ancient polytheism with its powerful but finite divinities, and fails to rise to the level of authentic Christianity. If God is truly infinite then everything that exists must be within God. If there is something outside God, then God cannot truly be infinite, but simply one being alongside others. But if God is infinite, it follows that “the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative, are themselves moments of the divine.”²²

The Christian teaching that God has become a human being is intimately linked to the doctrine that God is infinite. The separation of Creator and creature is a projection of the narrow vantage point of the separate ego. This was understood by the great Christian mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1328). Hegel cites with approval the teaching of this Christian mystic: “The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see him: my eye and his eye are the same.” This is not the God of Job, nor that of old Sol in “Crimes and Misdemeanor,” the unseen God who sees all our deeds from above and beyond the world. Eckhart rejects the separation of God and the human being: “If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would he.”²³

The same fundamentally Christian idea of the unity of God and humanity is at the foundation of modern Western philosophy. If Descartes begins with “I think,” he goes on to show that all thinking takes place in the light of the idea of God, which is the ideal of perfection to which we humans inevitably aspire in theoretical science and practical life. Jean-Paul Sartre follows this Cartesian idea when he argues:²⁴

God, the value and supreme end of transcendence, represents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is. To be man means to reach towards being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God.

To understand what “God” means, it is therefore necessary to understand what a human being is. In Chapter 6, we have seen that for Hegel the human being is initially the universal Life-Force become conscious of itself in self-conscious individual human beings. In the full development of human consciousness this Life-Force is realized as the Holy Spirit of the loving community, an I that is a We and a We that is an I.

The Unhappy Consciousness

For his consistent affirmation of the Christian doctrine that God and humanity are one, Meister Eckhart was condemned by the Church as a heretic. The theology of atonement insists on the radical separation of God and humanity, with the one exception being the God-Man, Jesus. But how can God and humanity be radically separate if even one human being can be God? Such would-be orthodox theology is not content with enunciating images for the devotional expression of feeling, but claims the status of conceptual thought for its representations. Consequently, this

conceptual theology inevitably falls within the evolution of contradictory forms of consciousness explored in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Specifically, the theology of atonement occupies the place in the evolution of consciousness that Hegel calls "The Unhappy Consciousness." The theologians of Kierkegaard's Denmark made this mistake, and so fell afoul of Kierkegaard's own dialectical deconstructions and reconstructions. But because he mistakenly took his socially complacent and rationalistic theologians for Hegelians, Kierkegaard failed to understand Hegel's own dialectical phenomenology as a unity-in-opposition of understanding and emotion.

The Unhappy Consciousness is a moment or stage in the evolution of the Master-Slave dialectic that arises in Hegel's *Phenomenology* out of the standpoint of the separate ego. We have seen in the previous chapter that the ego inevitably confronts other egos in a life and death struggle. Out of fear of death, the losers in this struggle submit to the winners, and so the standpoint of the ego gives rise to a society of masters and slaves, of dominators and dominated, or rulers and ruled.²⁵ It is in the context of the Roman slave empire that early Christianity affirms the moral supremacy of the slave over the master. It is the slave, by really transforming nature through his intelligent labor, Hegel argues, who ultimately triumphs over the master—reduced to the passivity and indolence, as well as unmitigated brutality. Hegel supports this reversal of the master morality by Christianity.

Hegel's dialectic of master and slave anticipates Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) notion that Christianity is an expression of "slave morality." But for Hegel, if Jesus appeals to the slave with his blessings for the outcasts, the prostitutes, the disfigured, and despised of contemporary Jewish society, he transforms the spirit of abasement with his teaching that humility of the ego is a necessary step for recognizing that beyond narrow ego-consciousness the human being is

essentially divine, the dwelling place of the Kingdom of God. The death of Jesus represents the death of all that is finite and vulnerable in human existence and the demonstration, through his resurrection, that human beings are truly one with Infinite Being. What dies on the cross on Mount Calvary is both God and humanity: God as the transcendent Creator regarded as separate from his creations, and the separate human individual regarded as a finite, fragile, negative being. What is resurrected from this two-fold negation is the unity of God and human being as the universal truth of the unlimited power and fulfillment of the loving human community, which Jesus called the Kingdom of God on earth. The true meaning of the Church therefore is not that of a hierarchical power over the laity, but the loving community that implicitly embraces all of humanity. In this way, the ideas of the French revolution find their roots in an egalitarian Christianity of universal human brother-and-sisterhood.

But before attaining this kingdom, the human being as a finite, separate individual must recognize the nullity of the separate ego, and so descend to the depths of the Unhappy Consciousness. For this consciousness, God is an unreachable Beyond, and the human being is less than nothing, a mere worm, lower than the beasts in fact for being truly bestial, like the human-looking brutes in *The Passion of the Christ* who laugh as they flay the helpless flesh of Jesus. What is the real meaning of sin, Hegel asks, if not the separation of the self as a finite ego from all the rest of reality, from Infinite Being. Such separation or “cleavage” produces the knowledge of good and evil, the world of duality and separation.²⁶ Prior its descent to this unhappy position, the finite, separate ego boasts of its truth and power as the center of the universe, its lord and master. We have seen that a *world* of such egos unleashes what the philosopher Hobbes calls “a war of all against all” and what Hegel calls “the life-and-death

struggle.” The world of separate egos is a reign of murder in which each ego attempts to triumph over every other ego. Inevitably some egos do triumph over others, producing the world of masters and slaves. This world is epitomized by the Roman slave empire, into which was born the babe of Bethlehem.

The ultimate truth implicit in the master-slave dialectic is the illusory nature of the separate ego. The slave, both because of her abasement before the master and the achievement of her creative work, is much closer to this truth than the master, who glories in his separate individuality with all the displays of pomp and circumstance that the spoils of conquest and the creative efforts of his slaves can produce. The pathetic weakness of the master, in contrast to the dignity of the slave, is seen in the contrast that *The Passion of the Christ* draws between the dithering Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, and simple yet courageous Simon of Cyrene. Simon is a kind of Everyman, naturally reluctant to be dragooned into an awful job with no pay and no glory, but soon siding with the oppressed Jesus. Hang in there, friend, he tells Jesus; it will all be over soon.

The slave mentality nevertheless has some devices for avoiding the lesson of the essential nullity of the separate and separating ego consciousness. Stoic philosophy teaches that true freedom is freedom of thought and such freedom is attainable even for the individual in shackles. But Skeptical philosophy, which dialectically follows on the heels of Stoicism in the *Phenomenology*, undermines the pretenses of such abstract rationality, showing that to every would-be universal truth affirmed by the Stoic an opposite truth is just as convincingly defensible. The Stoic calmly accepts the fact that the physical being of the slave has been reduced to a state of impotence, but glories in the superiority of the mind. Mere bodily existence,

whether in chains or on the throne, is insignificant, for true freedom is only available to the mind. However, through the attacks of a relentless skepticism, the mind of the Stoic too is revealed as empty of any concrete truth. Because the Stoic abstracts from the concrete world of the struggle of masters and slaves, his truths are purely formal ones: do what you have to do. If you are a slave, be a (good) slave. If you are a master, be a (good) master. For the Skeptic such alleged truths are mere tautologies and so empty of any real meaning. As this Skeptical consciousness penetrates the Stoic defenses, the truth that seemed to be within the grasp of Stoic consciousness recedes into “an unattainable beyond.”²⁷ The Stoic had argued that the mind is everything and the body nothing. But with the discovery that the vaunted achievements of purely mental existence are an illusion, there is nothing left to contemplate but the bodily existence that he has previously reduced to insignificance. Thus the deflated consciousness that has passed through Stoicism and Skepticism is left to contemplate the essential nothingness of both body and soul.

Jesus as Sinful Human Being

This anguish over the nothingness of the separate ego, the Unhappy Consciousness, is vividly depicted in *The Passion of the Christ* both in Jesus’ agonized plea in the Garden of Gethsemane that he be spared the coming trial, and more completely in his despairing cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Here we are furthest from the conception of a deified Jesus who is radically different from ordinary humanity. How is this completely human anguish compatible with the doctrine of the God-Man, separate from the rest of us? Another artist, inspired by another conception of Christianity, would linger over this moment as Hegel

does in his lectures, in which Jesus plumbs the depths of human despair. Hegel's interpretation radically departs from the theology of atonement. Jesus saves sinners only by being one of them.

In plumbing the depths of the radical separateness of the finite ego, Jesus embodied human sinfulness to its fullest extent. The deep spiritual meaning of the atonement is at-one-ment: the at-oneness or reconciliation of the human and the divine through the death of the separate self. It is not that Jesus, as a separate deified individual, takes on the sins of others and sacrifices himself for them, but that he himself fully embodied human sinfulness, i.e., human finitude and separation, to the extent of dying the infamous death of a criminal on the cross. In the context of Roman civilization Jesus was indeed a criminal for his teaching of the oneness of God and humanity, profoundly contradicting the hierarchical authority of the Roman slave-state with its religion of the god-man Emperor. And yet despite this teaching, and his continued *intellectual* awareness of his essential oneness with God, Jesus *felt* to the depths of his soul the separation of the finite, fallen, ego-based human consciousness. One who does not know of his oneness with God can never truly experience the paradox and pain of abandonment: of feeling separate from the being one nevertheless is. Hence, it was *his own* sinfulness that was "expiated" through his death.²⁸

Jesus is not a scapegoat for others; he did not expiate the sins of others. He suffered the price exacted by the ego-consciousness of humanity through his own embodiment of this consciousness. In taking human sinfulness to its final stage of self-conscious despair, he showed the Way and the Truth for each of us. He who taught about the implicit or essential unity of the human being and the divine fully embodied the finite, the fragile, the negative character of the separate ego unto its death. In the anguish of his abandonment on the cross, Jesus both

comprehended and transcended the Unhappy Consciousness of the separate ego and so initiated a new stage in which human consciousness grasps its true nature. Having taken the all-too-human form of ego consciousness to its logical conclusion in an ignominious death, he died to death itself, and so rose from this death in the transformed existence of Spirit. In the final scene of *The Passion of the Christ*, this Spirit is identified with Jesus as a solitary Savior. For Hegel, however, the resurrected Spirit is primarily that of the revolutionary new human community that has overcome the Unhappy Consciousness.

The resurrection of Jesus brings out the full meaning of his death. The death of God is at the same time the death of death, for Spirit is precisely that inner bond within each human being that unites with others and so survives the death of the finite separate self. Hegel defines Spirit [*Geist*] as the overcoming of the separate ego: “‘I’ that is ‘We,’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I.’”²⁹ The ‘I’ that confronts all the separate ‘I’s in a life-and-death struggle must die to this separation to rise to the level of Spirit. This full meaning of the human Spirit as the overcoming of the separation of the ego and the Unhappy Consciousness to which it leads is the goal of the *Phenomenology*, a goal that is *implicitly* realized in the religious experience of the Christian who identifies, in the form of feeling, with the death of Jesus.

The Calvary of Absolute Spirit

It is necessary to bring this implicit state of transformed consciousness into an adequate conceptual form by overcoming all remaining limited understandings and forms of experience. The rest of the *Phenomenology* explores further these developments. So at the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel calls the preceding stages of consciousness the “Calvary of Absolute

Spirit.”³⁰ In this formulation, Hegel declares that the *Phenomenology* as a whole, with its successive stages of the evolution of limited forms of human consciousness driven by contradiction, constitutes the full unfolding of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus.

By placing the burden of universal human self-transformation exclusively on the shoulders of the separate God-man Jesus, the theology of atonement remains fixated at the stage of the Unhappy Consciousness. In holding that the individual must affirm his own essential nothingness before an almighty Beyond, and so requires a mediator to save him, this theology ultimately fixes the sinner in his sin, and establishes him as incapable of real redemption. No one can perform the transformation of consciousness that saves us from the nullity of the isolated ego for anyone else. Jesus doesn't save us; we, following Jesus' lead, save ourselves. Against the superficial theology of atonement, the teachings of Jesus present at the level of feeling and picture thinking or in parables what conceptual philosophy shows to be the fundamental meaning of the human spirit. In this way reason is not replaced by or cancelled by faith, but faith finds its counterpart in a rational understanding that complements, elucidates, and justifies the religious evocation of feeling. Enlightenment philosophy, achieving its mature form in dialectical reasoning through the philosophy of Hegel, demonstrates that the history of humanity is the crucifixion and resurrection of Absolute Spirit.³¹

The Passion of the Christ concludes with the resurrected Jesus setting out to announce his message. But what is this message; what is the Good News? That humans are abject sinners incapable of saving themselves and yet happily find themselves saved by Jesus? Or that the human spirit is indeed indestructible, and that we must all reach beyond our own separate ego-identification, like the two Marys and Simon, and recognize the reflection of divinity in each

human being? *The Passion of the Christ*, insofar as it embodies the theology of separation, wants to perpetuate the radical human abasement of the Unhappy Consciousness, but in its fidelity to the Gospel account, which includes heroes and heroines as well as villains, it implicitly challenges this theology.

Hegel's own treatment of the passion of the Christ does not end with the death and resurrection of Jesus, but continues with the story of the new human community founded on the recognition of the Holy Spirit as an I that is a We and a We that is an I. This is the Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus likens it to a mustard seed.³² It cannot therefore be an otherworldly realm of rewards and punishments. It starts as the tiniest of seeds in the hearts of individuals. It naturally multiplies and spreads until it makes the earth a welcome abode for all of humanity. Hegel stresses the words of Jesus that he must go away, or die, so that the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, can descend on his followers.³³ Otherwise they would be tempted to turn the individual Jesus into a separate deity, and establish separatist communities of believers depending on whether or not they accept this new god—instead of recognizing the divine where it belongs, in themselves as human beings, bound together in spirit, in love. Jesus therefore really has to die, to leave the scene, Hegel says, for his teachings to be truly understood. For his teaching is not about himself as a special being, but about what is special in all of us.

Just as it is not necessary for us today to repeat all the illusion and suffering of slave society in concrete forms to grasp the lessons of this history, so we do not have to be nailed to a cross to die to the separate ego. The historical Jesus dramatically performed this exemplary act in the flesh. But each human being must repeat this death in the recognition of his or her own consciousness, and so be reborn in the awareness of our oneness with universal Spirit, i.e., of the

oneness of the individual with all humanity, and ultimately with All That Is, the Infinite Reality. The kingdom of God on earth is present here and now for those who understand the meaning of the evolution of human experience. This, Hegel brilliantly shows, is the deep meaning of Christianity.

For Jesus, we are all, like him, sons and daughters of God. And so the one prayer that he taught begins with the words, “Our Father.” As in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, as separate human egos we get lost in the worldly pursuit of riotous living, until we are reduced to a state of despair.³⁴ In Chapter 6 we have seen how Spirit is “involved” already in matter so that matter can evolve into Spirit. Such a conceptual understanding is presented emotionally in the picture-language of the Christian religion, the Father allows his Son, the expression of Himself in ordinary human ego-consciousness, to go into the world to have experiences of limitedness, want and conflict, anguish and despair. For only by overcoming the illusory state of non-divinity, can the divine essence of each individual be fully appreciated. And so, we human beings live our lives of noisy or quiet desperation in our various forms of isolation from the Infinity of Being. The Father, personifying in an emotionally laden picture the starting point of the dialectic logic of Spirit, knows that such a life leads inevitably to the crucifixion of the ego, but gives Himself, in the form of the Son, in the form of ego-centered human life, to this experience. The inevitable abandonment, impoverishment, and spiritual death to which this experience leads is not the end of the story, however. The Son, abandoning the abandonment, returns to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, reborn in the experience of his inalienable truth as a being inseparable from all other beings, one with the All, an I that is a We and a We that is an I. In this way Hegel explains

the philosophical essence of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which is also the theoretical meaning of the Passion of the Christ.³⁵

Jesus says that whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters we do to him, for there is no separation between Jesus and the most wretched human being.³⁶ It is Hegel's thought, not the theology of atonement, that gives full meaning to the words of Jesus: "He who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these . . ." ³⁷

In today's world of global economic unification, doctrines that promote religious exclusivity, like the theology of atonement, exacerbate the dangers of violence and the threats of war. According to Hegel, the God that rules over an unworthy humanity from a lofty heaven is the reflection of a human world of masters and slaves, rulers and ruled. The God of Christianity instead is one with the wretched of the earth, dying the death of a criminal, so that even the lowliest human beings can discover that the kingdom of heaven is within them, but only when they are willing to join together across separating political and religious borders to create a world that is worthy of us. Is it not written in the Scriptures, Jesus said to his critics, that you are gods?

¹ *Book of Job*, 31: 1-7, 26-29. In *The Holy Bible*, Ronald Knox translation, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956.

² *Ibid.*, 31:9.

³ *Ibid.*, 31: 5-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9:23-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:7-11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38: 1-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 42: 3.

⁸ This and the following texts are from *Isaiah*, Chapter 53, King James Version.

⁹ *Leviticus* 16: 20-22. (Knox trans.)

¹⁰ *Isaiah*, op. cit., Chapter 53.

¹¹ *John* 1: 29. (New King James Version.)

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- ¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume I, (New York: The Humanities Press, 1974), 389, 390.
- ¹³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Volume III, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 326.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ¹⁵ *Mark* 15:34, *Matthew* 27:46.
- ¹⁶ Hegel, 1985, *op. cit.*, 121.
- ¹⁷ *John* 10:30.
- ¹⁸ *John* 10:34; see Psalm 82:6.
- ¹⁹ David Bruce, editor, "Mel Gibson Interview." April 23, 2003. <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/newsletter053.htm> (accessed on 11-22-2005).
- ²⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, #277 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1958), 78.
- ²¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), paragraph 95,176-177.
- ²² Hegel 1985, *op. cit.*, 326.
- ²³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, 347-348.
- ²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes translator (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 724.
- ²⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111-119.
- ²⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. II, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 740-41.
- ²⁷ Hegel 1977, *op. cit.*, 131.
- ²⁸ Hegel 1985, *op. cit.*, 128-129.
- ²⁹ Hegel 1977, *op. cit.*, 110.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 808.
- ³¹ Hegel 1985, *op. cit.*, 128.
- ³² *Mark* 4:31, *Matthew* 13:31, *Luke* 13:19.
- ³³ Hegel 1985, *op. cit.*, 222; *John* 16:7.
- ³⁴ *Luke* 15: 11-32.
- ³⁵ Hegel 1985, *op. cit.*, 327-328.
- ³⁶ *Matthew* 25:40.
- ³⁷ *John* 14:12. New American Standard Bible.