

# Trinity in Christianity and Dialectics of Hegel

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**Abstract**—This paper will compare and contrast the concept of trinity in Christianity and Hegel's dialectic. As a matter of fact, trinity has developed in terms of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They have an inseparable relationship among each other but they have a distinctive functions and the method to vindicate the doctrine of trinity is seen in the Holy Bible. Hegel has appreciated the relation and difference that exist among the three-in-one God but he has developed a philosophical perspective known as dialectic. It has evolved out of the terms like contradiction and sublation including three principles of dialectic that are, i) unity and struggle of the opposites, ii) transition from quantity to quality and vice-versa, iii) negation of negation. In my attempt to articulate trinity and dialectic, I will take up Holy Spirit as the central doctrine in the trinity in as much as Hegel's *geist* or spirit is central to his dialectic. The Holy Spirit plays a central role in the doctrine of trinity because it unites the Father and the Son as one entity. God the Father cannot dispense Himself into men directly because of man's sins. He sends His Son on earth to pass through death and resurrection in order to become the Spirit so that God can impart Himself into men. Hegel's absolute spirit, like the Holy Spirit combines the objective and the subjective spirit as one in which there is unity in differences. There is a triadic movement in both trinity and dialectics that shows the influences of Christianity on Hegel's philosophy. This paper will consist of two parts; in Part-I, I will compare Holy Spirit of the trinity with Hegel's spirit in his dialectic and in Part II, I will discuss Hegel as a Christian philosopher but a proclaimed Lutheran.

The concept of trinity in Christianity has reflective influences on the philosophical insight of Hegel's dialectics. In Christianity, the notion of trinity can be considered as the central theme since without it, God could not have a relationship with man. God the Father who is the creator and originator of this universe created man in His own image and likeness [10(i)] with the intention that man could be His expression. When sin entered into man through the instigation of Satan, man fails to express God [10(ii)]. In order for God to recover man to His original intention, He sends His Son Jesus [10(iii)] to redeemed man from their sins and reconciled man to God [10(iv)]. God the Son became God the Spirit through resurrection [10(v)] that God could dispense Himself into man and thus God and man can have a divine union. God became the triune (three-in-one) God that is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit which is also called trinity [10(vi)]. This implies that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the three aspects of God and that, they coexist concurrently and

are inseparable from one another [10(vii)]. The application of the concept of trinity to the believer's experience is made possible through the Holy Spirit. It is in the Spirit that one can see the divine incorporation of the co-inhering Triune God co-inherited into the believers [6(i)]. Thus, the Holy Spirit is the reality of the divine trinity and is the ultimate consummation of the triune God.

Hegel's spirit has evolved from two fundamental sources, namely, from Christianity on the one hand and the philosophical tradition of the German Idealism on the other. From Christian tradition, Hegel's regards that philosophy is itself, as a religion and it is profoundly a study of God. And that the justification of God takes place only with the concept of subjective spirit. This position has evolved out of the notion of Holy Spirit in Christian tradition. Just as in Christian tradition, there are three features, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; there are objective spirit, subjective spirit and the absolute spirit according to Hegel too. There is distinction and relation between Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Hegel also proposes objective, subjective and absolute spirit in terms of philosophical concepts of contradiction and sublation. Just as Holy Spirit is the relationship between Father and Son, similarly Hegel's *Giest* or absolute spirit is the relationship between subjective spirit and objective spirit.

## Part I. The Holy Spirit

The *Bible* lucidly mentioned that "the Holy Spirit is the reality of the divine Trinity." [10(viii)] Jesus said in *John 14: 26*, "But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and remind you of all the things which I have said to you". This verse implies that the Spirit as the Son with the Father is in the believer. It also reveals that the coming of the Spirit is the coming of the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the presence of the Triune God within the believers [10(ix)]. Indubitably, one can clearly see in the *Bible* that, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are the three aspects of one God and the Spirit is the means for God to reach man and for man to contact God. *John 1:4*, and in *1 John 1:2* of the *Bible* indicates that the Father in the Son that is the Son as the course is similar to the spring of water emerging for the manifestation and expression of life. The Son as the Spirit of life spring up to be a river, avail as a means to

all as given in *Psalm 36:8-9, 46: 4* and in *John 7: 38* [6(iii)]. This metaphor shows how the three-in-one God functions as one entity. It also depicts the unity of the divine trinity in the dispensation of life. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct from each other but they are not discreet. It is the Spirit that carries out God's heart desire and accomplished God's organic salvation by making every believer members of the Body of Christ that is the Church [6(iii)]. In Christianity, Holy Spirit plays a significant role without which the whole doctrine of trinity will collapse.

Without God becoming the Spirit, the believers have no way to receive and contain God. In *John 16: 7-11*, Jesus said, "But when He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality; for He will not speak from Himself, but what He hears He will speak; and He will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; for this reason I have said that He receives of Mine and will declare it to you." These verses depicted that the Spirit is the organic transmission of the divine Trinity [6(i)]. The divine and human element of God the Father and God the Son are being transmitted to the believers through the Spirit. God, without becoming the Spirit is unprocurable for man since man is a sinner and has no capacity to obtain the holy and righteous God into their being. The Spirit as the embodiment of God, bring God into man and make God contactable, tangible, receivable, experience able and enjoyable [6(ii)]. All that the Father and the Son is in its divine life and nature is embodied in the Spirit. Thus, the receiving of the Spirit is the Receiving of the Father and the Son. "The Spirit is the mingling of divinity with humanity." [6(ii)] The Spirit is the practical application of the Triune God in Christian tradition. The Father is the source, the Son is the manifestation and the Spirit is the transmission of all that the Father and the Son is. The Spirit unites the Father and the Son as one and infuses and transfuses the essence of the Triune God into the believer. Thus, one can notice the unity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit in their differences.

It is also pivotal to consider how the Spirit becomes the ultimate consummation of the Triune God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one and they are not three separate entities. God the Father is the creator, the almighty, the divine, the holy and the righteous God who is the source of all things that exist in the universe. God the Son being in the Father is sent by the Father to become human possessing divine nature through the Spirit. And God the Spirit in the Son with the Father is the dispensing of God into man. When one meticulously observes the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, one can intelligibly conclude that they are distinct in their functions but they are the same in nature. They are three yet one, in short, Triune God. They are related to one another so it is apparent that coming of one of the three is always accompanied with the other two. One cannot deny that they are distinct but one has to keep in mind that they are not three different Gods. The Father cannot be completely

dissevered from the Son and the Spirit and the disuniting of the Son from the Father and the Spirit is out of the question. And the Spirit too can never be isolated from the Father and the Son. They are closely knitted together and are embedded to one in relation to the other and therefore they are one.

The reality of the Triune God is the Holy Spirit which paves the way for God and man to live as one entity. The whole concept of Trinity is bound to collapse in the absence of the Spirit. Not only that, the faith of a Christian will be just a doctrine in the mind without any practical experience of God. The reality of Christian traditions lies in the Holy Spirit. It is only through the Spirit that God and man can be become one. Salvation of sinners is possible only when God become the processed Triune God whose essence is the Spirit. The reconciliation of God and man is established because of the God being the Spirit. To illustrate the relations and differences among the three of the Godhead, the Father being the source of life can be compared to a fountain of water in *John 5:26*. The Father in the Son that is the Son as the course is similar to the spring of water emerging for the manifestation and expression of life as given in *John 1:4, 1John 1:2*. And in *Psalm 36:8-9, 46: 4* and *John 7: 38*, the Son as the Spirit of life spring up to be a river, avail as a means to all [6(iii)]. This metaphor shows how the three-in-one God functions as one entity. It also depicts the unity of the divine Trinity in the dispensation of life. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct from each other but they are not discreet. The believers can enter into the divine and mystical realm through the consummated Spirit. Not only that, God being everything to the believer become subjectively available to be the solutions to all problems for the believer as given in *1 Corinthians 1:2,9, 15:45*. It is the Spirit that carries out God's heart desire and accomplished God's organic salvation by making every believer members of the body of Christ that is the Church [6(iii)]. From the given discussion one can see the significant role of the Holy Spirit in Christian traditions.

### Hegel's Geist

Hegel has appreciated the relation and difference that exist among the three-in-one God in the concept of trinity. He has developed a philosophical perspective known as dialectic. It has evolved out of the terms like contradiction and sublation. Hegel's dialectics is actuated by contradictory nature. For Hegel, everything that exists has contradiction and it is dialectic that operates to integrate them by transforming them from less perfect to more perfect. In *Science of Logic*, he says, "...everything is inherently contradictory and in the sense that this law in contrast to other expresses rather the truth and the essential nature of things...Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity." [3]

Contradiction, according to Hegel, is the essential nature of things that causes movement that is always in the process of

developing in an ascending manner. He seems to suggest that as long as contradiction exists, things are always moving in a progressive manner. In fact, contradiction is the very vitality of things and therefore Hegel uses contradiction and sublation as the two operative terms in his dialectics. The concept of contradiction in Hegel's dialectics can be compared with the Christian's notion of the Father and the Son since both of them are contradictory in nature which is divinity and humanity. And these contradictions are sublated as one by the Spirit while retaining their identities. There is a triadic movement in both Hegel's dialectics and in Christian's trinity in which there is unity in differences that evidently highlighted the influences of Christianity in Hegel's philosophy.

Hegel dialectics is actuated by contradictory nature. For Hegel, everything that exists has opposites character for each existing things and it is dialectic that operates to amalgamate them by transforming them from less perfect to more perfect. In the *Science of Logic* one can see Hegel's position on contradiction, when he says,

"...everything is inherently contradictory and in the sense that this law in contrast to other expresses rather the truth and the essential nature of things...Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity."[3]

Dialectics cause transition of things which transforms things in an ascending order and this process of becoming is interminable until it reaches its destination of being absolute. Hegel's concept of dialectics can be in tune with his notion of spirit. Spirit too operates in a dialectical manner where spirit can be identified with the concept of sublation which combines contradiction. "The laws of dialectics—unity and struggles of the opposites, transition from quantity to quality and negation of negation are the *externalization* of the spirit."[8(ii)] First, unity and struggle of the opposites can be explained by his notion of Being, Nothing and Becoming. There is unity between Being and Nothing in their vacuity and at the same time there is also struggle because Being has the potential to become something and Nothing is utter void. Therefore Becoming negates their differences and maintains their identity. Second law is transition from quantity to quality. Hegel states that changes takes place because of quantitative change. Increase in quantity leads to qualitative change. And the third law is negation of negation. This law is the development of lower stage into higher stage because the unity of the opposite does not exclude each other but pass on to each other. The negation of Being and Nothing by Becoming is not complete negation because Being and Nothing on one hand is similar to Becoming in terms of their emptiness. Becoming is also empty since it has not become something concrete though it has the potentialities to become anything. It is negation of negation in the sense that it negates by integrating their difference where there is inclusive whole. It is spirit that gives rise to the law of dialectics. And the

operation of the spirit is similar to the law of dialectics where the absolute spirit sublates the objective and subjective spirit.

"Hegel's spirit is a doctrine about the relationship between thought and objective reality."[8(i)] For Hegel, thought is represented as idea and objective reality can be represented as nature. Idea, according to Hegel, is "the categories and the notion which are also known as the truth in the most absolute and objective form. And nature is the sphere of external existence of which the truth is about. In short, the term *idea* Hegel designates to the absolute truth and nature refers to the truth as we find it in the world which has outward existence."[8(i)] For Hegel, spirit is the mediation between idea and nature like in Christianity; Holy Spirit bridged the gap between the Father and the Son. For Hegel, idea and nature which can be identified as objective and subjective spirit are dialectical opposites, there is a difference between them but the spirit unites them. The spirit maintains the relationship between idea and nature by uniting them in spite of their differences. Hegel believes that between idea and nature, there is something that is identical but this notion of being identical is not with the sphere of thought and also not with the objects of thought. Hegel asserts that it is the spirit that imparts intelligible form of both this sphere. For him, it is the spirit that creates the relationship between idea and nature irrespective of their differences. In fact, the spirit forms the concept of identity in differences. Hegel gets this notion of spirit from Christianity.

In Christianity, it is also the Holy Spirit that unites the Father and the Son as one, by uniting; their distinctive nature is not eliminated but maintained. The Father can be place as the objective spirit and the Son as the subjective spirit and the Holy Spirit as the absolute spirit of Hegel. It is the function of spirit in Christian tradition, which maintain the Father and the Son as one, in spite of their different function, so is Hegel's concept of spirit, which brings unity in differences. The difference between Hegel's spirit and the Holy Spirit is that Hegel's notion of spirit is purely for epistemological quest, where as in Christianity, the Holy Spirit is wholly for the believer's experiences of the triune God. Hegel's epistemological position showed his application of religious concept in his philosophy. Basically, epistemology deals with consciousness of object that gives knowledge.

For Hegel, "spirit is the active synthesis of our consciousness of the world, and what we are conscious of."[7(i)] As pointed out earlier, spirit is the mediation between idea/ objective spirit and nature/subjective spirit. This idea can be referred to our consciousness of the world and nature can be referred to what we are conscious of. The object of consciousness which gives us knowledge does not show the distinction between what exist for us and what exist in itself. Hegel believes that things exist because we are conscious of it. And his prime concern not to show distinction between what is available for us and what is not available in our consciousness. He believes that things are given to us in its wholeness. His concern lies in

consciousness that makes objects exist because we are conscious of it. And what is given as the object of consciousness is what that matters. There is nothing that is knowable and unknowable object. The point that matters is what ignites consciousness that produce knowledge from less perfect to more perfect. In complementary to the Christian's concept of the Holy Spirit which makes God reachable to man, Hegel used the notion of absolute spirit for sublating the objective spirit and the subjective spirit in his epistemological quest for arriving at the absolute truth.

## Part II. Hegel as a Christian philosopher

Hegel has propounded his philosophical system in a triadic structure which he has taken from Christian concept of trinity and his dialectical reason has its insight from the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Hegel pointed out in *Encyclopedia*, "The content of philosophy and religion is the same." [7(ii)] Their content basically is to strive to attain the highest goal i.e. God for religion and Absolute for philosophy. Rosen interpreted that what Hegel meant here is that "religion is to be assimilated upward into philosophy. Only when this is accomplished does modern history fully enlightened human spirit." [7(ii)] Not only being theologically influenced,

Hegel also affirms that, "Christianity is the absolute religion because it has for its content the absolute truth. Its content is, according to Hegel, identical with the Hegelian philosophy." [9(i)] Hegel held that philosophy also has the absolute as its content. According to him, Christianity also has this identical content like philosophy which is the absolute truth. He called Christianity as a revealed religion [2]) in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. "It is the religion in which God completely and finally reveals himself as what He is, as concrete spirit, the full nature of which is now made manifest." [9(i)] In Christianity, the absolute truth is God and He revealed Himself to man through the Spirit. God is revealed through the Spirit in the doctrine of creation, fall, incarnation, redemption, resurrection, ascension, church and Trinity. For Hegel, all these doctrine are the essences of Christianity and he firmly considered it as the truth. With the assertion of Christianity as the absolute religion, Hegel conceives the notion of spirit from the Holy Spirit. Just as he sees the Holy Spirit as the revelation of God, he also used his notion of spirit as the disclosure of the absolute truth.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit can be expounded in Hegel's logical ideas of Universal, Particular and Individual. "The fundamental determination of Christianity is that God is concrete spirit. Concrete spirit is that which, in accordance with the moment of the notion is, 1) the universal which suffers redemption into 2) the particular, which returns to identity with universal in the three individual." [9(ii)] The notion of the universal can be identified with God, the Father. The first moment is, God before the creation of the world is the same with the notion of Universal. Universal has no concrete existent, it lies in it abstract form but it has the

potential to become something. When God the Father took the form of man by becoming the Son, one can see the second moment. In this second moment, the Father being the Universal took a Particular form in the Son out of itself. The Son, being the Particular return to the Father that is the Universal by passing through incarnation, redemption, and resurrection, He becomes the Spirit that is the Individual. Here one sees the returning of the Particular to the Universal in Individual. The Universal is not only the universal, it also contain the Particular as well as the Individual. The three notions are one and that they can never be separated in a strict sense. They in dwell in one another just like the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit mutually co-exist. They are three notions yet one, like the three-in-one God. The Universal is the Particular and the Individual and the Particular likewise is the Universal and the Individual. Similarly, the individual is the Universal and the Particular. They are three notions yet one so is the doctrine of Trinity in Christian Traditions. Just like the Individual that contain three moments, the Holy Spirit also contain the Father as well as the Son. They are not different from each other yet they are three aspects of one God. Each part contains the whole that is they are present in each part, which means the Father is in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the Universal is also in the Particular and Individual. They are not three notions but one. The logical connection of the Universal, Particular and the Individual is apparently seen in the doctrine of Trinity. In both case one can see unity of differences. This also again proves that Hegel can be considered as a Christian philosopher since his philosophy has theological lineage to it.

The doctrine of redemption can be applied to Hegel's dialectic where contradictions like Universal and Particular are sublating in the Individual. There is moment of sublation when dialectical opposites are put together. The concept of Individual is the sublation between Universal and Particular. Likewise, the concept of redemption, reconcile God and men who were once enemies. God is the Holy and righteous one whereas man is sinful and can never matches God's righteousness and holiness. Similarly, Universal is different from Particular, the former has the potential to become something while the later is complete impotent, incapable of becoming anything. So it is the Individual that amalgamated the Universal and Particular. Thus they become one in the Individual. It is in redemption that God and man can become as one. But their oneness does not produce the third element, God is still remains as God and man still remains as man. Likewise, the Universal and the Particular are sublating as one in the Individual but their identity is still maintained. When they are put together they display one complete whole which is elevated to a higher stage of development. The whole development is the development of spirit where the subjective and objective are reconciled in the Absolute spirit just like redemption reconciled man and God in the Holy Spirit. So Hegel's dialectics clearly has its insight from theology.

Glenn says that “In his insistence that God is completely knowable through mind as it develops in history, Hegel reveals his preference for theology as the highest manifestation of religion. In philosophical theology or a theological philosophy, we discover the identity of the three consubstantial activities of *geist*.”[1(i)] Hegel indeed, develops the movement of *Geist* or spirit from the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Christian traditions. He regarded Christian theology as the highest manifestation of religion in which God has become triune by becoming the Holy Spirit in order to make man the same as He is. The spiritual concept of becoming like God in Christianity is rationalized in Hegel’s philosophy as human spirit endeavoring to become the absolute truth. Like Hegel’s concept of becoming more perfect as time goes by, Christian also believes in the process of becoming God in life and in nature. It is the functions of the Holy Spirit that transformed man into the image and likeness of God. Hegel also has this similar idea of spirit which acts as the vital force in attaining the highest truth. Hegel’s spirit also operates in transforming subjective and objective spirit to higher stage of the absolute spirit.

In his interpretation of Hegel’s concept of religion, Glen says that, “the words of the Bible are a statement of truth which is not systematic; they are Christianity as it appears in the beginning; it is spirit which grasps the content, which unfolds its meaning.”[1(iii)] This line of interpretation suggest that Hegel approves the Bible to be the truth and its content is to be capture by the spirit that will eventually disclose its meaning in relation to thought as well as in actuality. He emphasizes the work of the Spirit that makes the words of the Bible real to the believers. The Spirit, in fact, is the application of the word of God in reality. Not only that, the Spirit makes God real to man. Hegel, who gets his motivation from theology, also applies the doctrine of Spirit in his dialectics. For him, the human spirit has the capacity to capture the absolute and while in the process of attaining the truth, the spirit gives meaning to each moments of movement.

Rosen says, “Hegel insist upon religious self consciousness as the root of spirit. “The foundation of all actuality,”[1(ii)] he submits Christianity (the ostensibly true religion) to an interpretation so rationalistic as to evoke the often overpowering conviction that we are once more in the presence of the pride of the philosophers.”[7(i)] For Hegel, the beginning of philosophical thinking arises from religious self consciousness because the spirit activates as real entity in the philosophical mind. He emphasizes on religious consciousness since he believes that philosophy and religion are closely connected and he brings religious concept into his philosophy and rationalize them. He admits that Christianity being the true religion is the foundation of all actuality which means that his philosophical system has its fundamental bases mainly from Christian doctrine of Trinity and redemption. He sees dialectics everywhere whether in thought or in actuality since things are given with its respective contradictions and it is dialectical reason that resolves contradiction and sublates them

into one whole while at the same time maintaining their uniqueness. He got this idea of dialectic from the Christian doctrine of Trinity where the Father and the Son though different in their nature are united as one in the Holy Spirit. And he also conceives the idea of sublation from the doctrine of redemption where God and man in spite of being dialectical opposites are reconciled as one. Thus, his application of Christian theology vindicates his saying that Christianity is the foundation of all actuality.

The influence of Christianity in Hegel’s philosophy can be seen in the following sentences, “The whole of spirit, the spirit of religion as such, is a movement away from immediacy towards knowledge of what spirit is in and for itself, toward a shape that is perfectly identical with its essences. Hegel believes that this movement attain its consummation in a particular historical religion, Christianity, which consequently is the absolute or “revelatory religion.”[2] “The revelatory Christian religion, where spirit attains true shape in a self consciousness that is both divine and human: but the representational form in which this is expressed must still pass into absolute knowing. This is Hegel’s first sustained afford to establish the internal arrangement of religion.”[5] From the above quotation, one cannot deny the fact that that Hegel’s philosophy has a theological lineage and that he can be read as a Christian philosopher.

To conclude, highlighting the Spirit as the central theme and examining the doctrine of trinity in Christianity in the light of comparing and contrasting with Hegel’s dialectics, it can be pointed out that Hegel’s absolute spirit is the mediation between objective and subjective spirit in the same way the Holy Spirit is the also mediation between the Father and the Son. In both cases, the Spirit sublates and brings identity in differences. There is a triadic structure of activity in both the cases, which is always ascending towards the highest truth. The difference between the Holy Spirit and Hegel’s spirit is that the former is purely for spiritual experience of the believer and the later is for ontological and epistemological quest. The different interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy validate the theological lineage to his philosophy which indisputably makes him a Christian philosopher. He considers Christianity as the absolute religion whose content is the truth in its pure form. He conceptualizes Christian belief and integrates it in his philosophy. In other words, he rationalizes Christian doctrine of Trinity. On the whole, Hegel’s dialectical system portrays the triadic movement which he has taken it from Christianity. Thus, one sees Hegel as a Christian philosopher.

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