

Hegel and 'The End of History'

Nicholas Boyle

Part II

Now I have already indicated that the picture I have painted of what I believe to be post-1945 socio-economic reality corresponds after a fashion to the picture of the cultural and intellectual world to be found in the works of writers who concern themselves with what since 1975 has been called 'postmodernism'. I should like as the next stage in my argument just briefly to survey the correspondences.

Firstly there is the question of politics, which seems to me intimately linked with the term 'postmodern' itself. I regard 'postmodern' as corresponding to what I have today called 'post-1945', for I believe that post-modernism is inseparable from the development of the global market. This is not an obvious point, for there has been much discussion among those who have taken up the term on whether 'postmodern' is a chronological term at all. Most have taken the view that it is not, that what they mean by postmodernism is something that runs in parallel with modernism or is even a permanent possibility of the human spirit — it is suggested that Montaigne, in the 16th century, is postmodern, but the brothers Schlegel, in 1800, are only modern. (It is of course a Frenchman who makes the suggestion.) As it is part of a postmodernist approach to deny — at any rate from time to time — the significance of chronology this is an understandable ploy. Indeed the term 'postmodernist' is a good one precisely because 'modernism' in all the arts depended on the belief in an opposition between the present and the past. To be modern was to do things differently. The architects to whom the term postmodernist was first applied wanted to deny that opposition and wanted to develop an eclectic style that made free use of any and every past architectural possibility. For the postmodernist architect all past styles are simultaneously available as templates in his database. However, one reason why non-chronological definitions of postmodernism are favoured is in my view the rather unpolitical nature of postmodernist thinkers. They seem to have been infected by the withering-away of national politics which I take to be a feature of the post-1945 world in

which, as in post-modernist writing, the dominant symbol is the shopping mall. Among the anti-chronological postmodernists we have on the one hand non-Marxists like Lyotard and Derrida who seem to favour an anarchist line, telling us to jump on to the current alternative protest-wagon as it passes by. On the other hand we have an avowed Marxist like Fredric Jameson who maintains the traditional Marxist contempt for political life, regarding it as a superficial offshoot of the economic process, and happily acknowledging his full agreement in this, and even in all other respects, with the 'neo-liberal' right-wing economists, the theoreticians of the market. Evidently, if postmodernism is some kind of permanent possibility of the human mind and not historically specific, and so not occasioned by any specific set of circumstances, then it cannot be made the object or motive for any specific and sustained course of political action which seeks to modify or respond to circumstances. It is therefore politically essential to assert that 'postmodernism' is a chronological term. The loss of a sense of the past, the collapsing of all significance into the present, the refusal to regard the existing market as caused by or developing out of anything is, I believe, one of the most paralysing features of the socio-economic system that has developed since 1945. To assert the historical contingency of what has happened by asserting the chronological application of the term 'postmodernism' is to take a first step out of the trance. To do otherwise, is to collaborate with the hypnotist.

Secondly, we can see another strange coincidence between postmodernist thought and the consequences of the establishment of the global market if we turn to the question of personal identity, the object of some of the most intensive postmodernist speculation. The belief that there is no principle of unity in the self, indeed that the self — usually called the subject — does not really exist, is one of the commonplaces in postmodernist thought, and it is a commonplace increasingly borne out by post-modern life in which the external institutions which gave us identity by giving us continuity seem to be fading into the background, in which jobs for life have become, and marriages for life are becoming, the exception rather than the rule, and in which we all seem to be required either to keep running faster in order to stay in the same place or to give up any pretence of controlling our own destiny and allow ourselves to be swept along by events. The question 'who am I?' seems ever harder to answer, indeed it seems an ever emptier question as it gets ever less obvious what might count as an answer to it. For that difficulty there are solid social and economic reasons: we do not have to appeal to intellectual

developments — whether psychoanalysis, Heidegger or existentialism — in order to understand why it is growing.

Thirdly, the other great theme in postmodernist thought, sometimes called the crisis of the sign — the sign being an element in a system of signification, i.e. a language — corresponds to the shift we detected in the nature of value. Indeed in both cases we could speak of a loss of confidence in the notion of truth and a virtual divinization instead of the media of communication. Just as in postmodernist architecture you can now have every style except an authentic one of your own, so in postmodernist literary criticism you can have any and every interpretation of a text except the authentic one — and similarly we saw that the shopping mall of values in the pluralist world offers you every alternative to the market except a real one (which would put an end to the shopping expedition). The demand for authentic values now rings as hollow as the demand for a definitive interpretation: deep down we know that what we really believe in is the system, not any meaning or satisfaction that it promises to give us “at the end of the day”, when the work of interpretation, or shopping, is over. For the system — like shopping, interpretation, satellite television, the world’s stock and money markets, and work — has no end and no Sunday and goes on uninterrupted 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

I had better explain what Hegel has had to do with all of this. Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, published in book form after his death, were his most popular and most influential work but they have a rather questionable reputation. They seem to me still however immensely stimulating and profound, especially if they are taken together with the *Philosophy of Right*, to which they are a sort of 400 page appendix. For the *Philosophy of Right* is Hegel’s philosophy of the state, and one of the important things to grasp about Hegel’s historical lectures is that the term ‘world-history’ does *not* mean ‘the history of everything’ but explicitly is said to mean something quite narrow: the history of ‘nations in so far as they have formed themselves into states’. So world-history is concerned with the history of the largest political units into which human beings have formed themselves — it is history with a broad brush, certainly, but conceptually we are dealing with something quite specific.

States of course are defined not just by being large collections of human beings — that is what the *Philosophy of Right* is all about. Nor are all states the same. In the *Philosophy of World History* Hegel is concerned with the different forms the state has taken on in the course of time and though he represents these changes as a development, it is

important to realise that when one state form is supplanted by a new one it does not necessarily go out of existence but may continue, even up to Hegel's own time, as a kind of living fossil.

And the different forms of states are associated by Hegel with two other things which change in the course of time: indeed for him they are so closely associated that a significant difference in the form of a state is impossible without a significant difference in these other two factors — and vice versa (twice over, since we have 3 variables). The other two factors which change with the state, and with which the state changes are: the moral self-understanding of the human individuals making up the nation which has formed itself into a state — what Hegel calls 'Sittlichkeit'; and the nation's religion, its conception of God.

In other words for Hegel the political constitution, the prevailing sense of personal identity, and the religion, of a state are so intimately linked that all three must change together:

"the Athenian or the Roman state was possible only given the specific form of paganism of those nations, just as a Catholic state has a different spirit and a different constitution from a Protestant state".

The reason Hegel gives for this special significance of religion is that:

"Religion is the point where a nation defines for itself what it regards as truth".

A culture's religion expresses what the people of that culture really believe to be the facts of life, what they really take seriously: it is therefore the crucial point of interaction between what is publicly acknowledged to be the order prevailing in the state and what is felt to be the reality of an individual life; for it expresses the truth that is felt to be common to both. According to Hegel then, the State, the self, and the conception of God all vary together, and world history, as the history of forms of the state, is also the history of changing forms of the self and of religion. I shall not now try to exemplify this pattern from Hegel's sequence of state forms — China and India, Egypt and Persia, Greece and Rome, and what he calls the Germanic nations of medieval and modern Europe. But I expect it is already evident that in discussing the new world order after 1945 I have concentrated in turn on the three areas which according to Hegel have to be treated together by the student of world-history: State, Self, and God.

Hegel, however, can give us more help than this in understanding where we are at, and in particular, by taking issue with his account of the religious component in world-history, we can try to formulate the role of the Catholic Church in our own time. I should like to look at three of the commonest objections made to Hegel's philosophy of history and try to draw out of them some grounds of hope. For hope is what we need. I have deliberately painted as grim a picture as possible of the contemporary landscape since I wanted to do justice to the pain and disorientation and collapse that is intrinsic to an age of such rapid change. But Hegel is above all others the philosopher who shows how out of conflict and disintegration a new wholeness can proceed, and the Church has the longest possible experience of preaching a similar message.

Firstly then, it has often been objected, most notoriously by Marx, that Hegel's account of the state, and so of world-history, is idealist rather than materialist. It seems to give priority to human beings' thoughts rather than to the material conditions of their existence. In particular, it gives a prominent place to political institutions and neglects the economic forces which are — according to the Marxists and the New Right economists — far more significant in the moulding of society. To the complex questions this objection raises no short answer is possible, but it is possible to point to a misconception which may underlie the objection, and when that misconception is removed much of the force of the objection goes with it. The misconception is the belief that there is an opposition between the economic and political realms, as if economic forces compelled us to act, while politics, by contrast, pretended to be an area of freedom in which we organize ourselves according to our free choice. For Hegel, however, — who gives incidentally a considerable, though subordinate, position to the economic system in his account of the state — there is no such opposition. Hegel is a radical humanist and a radical libertarian: *all* our social arrangements are our choice, he believes; all society, in its economic as in its political aspects, is an expression of our freedom. Political institutions — in ideal, stable, circumstances — are merely the most self-conscious and rational expression of the *same* order as we find in our economic arrangements. This is something it is particularly important for us to take to heart in the present highly unstable and far from ideal circumstances. For the withering away of political institutions in the post-1945 world is essentially a national phenomenon, and it corresponds to a decline in the significance of nations themselves. That decline has been brought about by the growth of a global economic order. The imperative that faces us in the

future is the construction of a political order corresponding in scope and structure to the new world market. One thing the chaos in Eastern Europe, particularly Russia, ought to have taught us, is that the economic system is not self-sufficient: without laws of property and property transfer, without protection against violence and confiscation, only the most primitive economic relations are possible. A global economy *needs* global politics, not just in order to control it, in so far as politics *can* control economics, but in order to preserve it — against, for example, the threat of war, or sudden changes of national boundaries. And that brings me to the second point.

A second objection frequently made to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World-history* is that they are Eurocentric. Large parts of the non-European world are explicitly excluded from consideration and the story Hegel tells leads with uncanny inevitability towards Europe and Hegel's own place and time. There are some special reasons for this shape to Hegel's story which I cannot deal with now, but the general charge of Eurocentricity is one I am very happy not to rebut. It is one of the rainbow of delusions which have multiplied since 1945 that world-history might have many centres: on the contrary, either it has no centre at all, or it has one centre and that centre is Europe. The delusion consists, as do most of the delusions of alternative values, in the failure to recognise that there is only one economic system and that it is now world-embracing. World-history *may* once have had many strands — though Hegel would deny this — but now it has only one, and that strand has for much of its length passed through Europe. Specifically, it was in Europe and in Europe's relations with its colonies, in America and Asia and eventually in Africa, that the global market began to be formed, and in its present world-embracing stage it still bears many traces of its European origin — notably the ubiquity, especially at bankers' conferences, of suits and ties. — But that is a question of the past, and would be on its own a pettifogging reason for Eurocentric philosophy, and so no reason at all. In the present there is of course no reason whatever for asserting the world economic system to be Eurocentric: all the indications are that Europe's relative economic significance will decline rather than increase. But in one respect the Europe which nurtured Hegel still is the growing-point of world-history. It is the point at which political developments are taking place which are literally without precedent, and which are without parallel elsewhere in the world. The growth of the European Union — long, rheumatic and uncertain though it is — is by far the most complex and advanced political response to the existence of a transnational economic system that the world has to

offer at present. The wholly unprecedented nature of the Union accounts for the great conceptual difficulties our politicians have in explaining it to themselves and their electorates. Plainly the European Union can become neither a superstate nor a mere treaty organization of nations, for both prognoses assume the continued possibility of nation states in the postmodern world. The Europe of the future will not be a USE, and it will not be an *Europe des patries* either: it will be *different*, from any political structure seen before, and that is probably the most encouraging thing about it. The interrelation of the 12 states is already of a sophistication far surpassing that of any of the merely international organizations which have become so numerous since 1945 and which themselves would have been unthinkable 100 or even perhaps 50 years ago. The European Union begins to do political justice to the degree of economic interpenetration of nations that the last half century has brought and that has made the traditional national boundaries obsolete. Europe is the testing ground for whatever political structures will in future have to secure the world economy — the monitoring authority set up under the new GATT agreement, which will bear a faint resemblance to the European Commission, is perhaps a first indication that the European experiment may eventually provide a model for bodies with worldwide responsibilities. This is partly perhaps because Europe has a very long history of the complex interaction of many states, as well as by far the oldest functioning international organization, the Catholic Church, which throughout the Middle Ages gave Europe its unity. Without asserting that the European Union is the faith, one can perhaps say that the Catholic Church's singular success in preserving its transnational activities throughout the 19th century heyday of the nation states suggests that there are in Europe forces making for order and unity even now those states have gone into decline. But some reservations are necessary and with them we have arrived at the third point.

The third commonly made objection to Hegel's philosophy of history, and the last I wish to consider, is that it has a Protestant bias. Naturally, I think this is an objection with which one may have some sympathy. But the Catholic Church has already accepted many of the fruits of the Reformation and it is not impossible that her future teachers may incorporate so manifestly providential an event in their understanding of the Church's historical character. Hegel's philosophy of world-history is an important corrective to the complacent view, prevalent in many Catholic circles, though rarely publicly enunciated, that Protestantism is defunct and insignificant —

say in comparison with Orthodoxy. For in Hegel's account the end of history has indeed occurred, or at any rate begun, but this happened not in the French Revolution, but in the Reformation. Essentially, for Hegel, the Reformation is the beginning of secularization, and secularization, for Hegel, is the supreme religious process, the process by which the divinity of our human world — our human social and institutional world — is at last consciously grasped: the divine is no longer relegated to special churchy institutions or special churchy parts of life, but our whole life, personal, social, and political, is understood as the product of the divine spirit which breathes through our own free actions — the product therefore of us, as divine. World-history being the story of the state-forming varieties of religious awareness, and no further development of religious awareness being possible after its transformation into pure self-awareness, world-history has indeed come to an end with the event which inaugurates the modern secular state, the Reformation. Throughout the post-Reformation period the modern state has of course developed its character, it has grown both in internal complexity and in its coverage of the globe, and it has become all the time more secular and more aware of its divinity. Hegel lived at a time when the global market, modern media, and their divinization, lay some way in the future, but I do not think he would see these developments as anything but confirmation of his view. Secularity is a Christian discovery, as old as Christianity itself but first rendered explicit at the Reformation: in so far as the modern state — which need not be a nation-state — is secular, and not enchained to the service of old gods, it is Christian, specifically, it is Protestant.

My view of the Catholic understanding of the Reformation is that we think the Reformation's fundamental error was not heresy but schism, it was an act of pride. The weakness in Hegel's philosophy, not just his philosophy of world-history, must from a Catholic point of view I think be its pride. Unlike Kant, Hegel does not leave room — and emphatically refuses to leave room — for a residuum of the inexplicable, of that which is not accessible to thought. According to Hegel, no significance in world-history attaches to the continued existence of living fossils — but, world-history having ended, perhaps a living fossil such as the Catholic Church may have a part to play once more and I should like to conclude by considering how the Church may be expected to adapt to, or to influence, the new world order, post-1945 and post-1989. I shall follow once again the Hegelian pattern of collectivity, identity, and truth, State, Self, and God. My guiding principle will be that to be Catholic is to reject the Hegelian

assertion of the absolute identity of these three. In the historical world at any rate — eschatology may be another matter — we are not God, we are not the State, and the State is not God; and historically since its earliest days the Church has maintained this position by maintaining an independent institutional existence for the Church separate from that of the State. Only in the countries where the Reformation took hold was the Church's millennial refusal to worship Caesar overthrown as a matter of principle.

I therefore think that, paradoxically perhaps, the Church's status as an international organization is likely to be more problematic in the future than it has been for many centuries. In the era of nation-states, the internationalist aspect of the Church was one of its most obviously noble and appealing features; the Church offered a broader loyalty, and a broader basis for conscience, which could liberate people from stifling nationalism and petty or brutal local tyrannies. Its universality was enough to guarantee its proper role of opposing the State's pretension to total rule over minds and bodies. But in the new order that universality may become the matter of a more serious temptation than the institutional church has suffered since the sixteenth century. For the new order is universal too, and it has certainly not given up its ambition to rule us body and mind. The Church may be tempted to collaborate with worldly powers, flattered that they have at last adopted its global perspective. But the worldly powers have their own motives and purposes, and if one is disturbed when a papal tour becomes a media event it is because it is becoming unclear in such a case who is using, or paying homage to, whom.

Of course, the Church has always, and of necessity, taken much of its institutional character from the political world of its day. The Popes have been feudal lords in a feudal era, absolute monarchs in the age of absolutism, in the 19th century they became something like presidents-for-life of a kind of international nation-state within the nation-states. It is not to be wondered at if in the future they look a little more like chairmen of IBM or the World Health Organization. The First Vatican Council was a very necessary battering-down of the hatches to face the totalitarian pretensions of the state in the era of unrestrained nationalism: in order to face down the dictators, from Bismarck to Jaruzelski, the Church had to turn itself into something very like the militarized dictatorships it was opposing — Orwell was right to see the Catholicism of his day as a variant of the nationalism he deplored, though he was wrong to imagine that it was the whole, or even a large part, of the Catholic Church. Similarly the Church of the future will act as one global agency among others, and we shall be

glad that it is there to do this for us; as our forefathers were glad that the Church had the strength and presence to speak as a state to other states in an age when jurisdictions rarely crossed national boundaries and a man or woman at odds with their country had very few friends. But in those days internationalism of itself gave a certain, almost suprahistorical, aura of moral authority. In the future that will no longer be the case, and if the Church is to continue to be different, to continue to be unassimilated to the secular world which it nonetheless addresses, it will have to draw its authority from elsewhere. I suggest that the Church of the future will need to draw its moral strength not from its international presence but from its claim to represent people as they are locally, and distinct from the world-wide ramifications of their existence as participants in the global market. Whatever currents may seem to be swirling temporarily in a contrary direction, the moral authority of the Church in future will lie, as the Second Vatican Council foresaw, with the College of bishops. It will be the bishops, rather than specifically the papacy, which will challenge the claim of the global market to express and exhaust the human world. J.F. Lyotard thinks that in the postmodern world history indeed is finished and the grand narrative of the development of the human race, in the manner of Hegel and Marx, is no longer possible; only little narratives can now be told, *petits récits*, which make temporary and local sense of events. I disagree though only partially. Grand narrative continues: on the global scale history is only just beginning, for the struggle to establish a political order corresponding to the economic has a long way to go, and on that journey the Catholic Church has to play, and in the person of the present Pope has begun to play, a prominent role. But the little narratives of the victims of the grand process, the stories of what the big new world is squeezing out or ignoring, they will be told on the small scale, and full of details which the new world will dismiss as superficial and inessential. In terms of Church structure, the little narratives will be told at diocesan, parochial or base-community level.

This lesson can be applied to the other areas which to postmodernist thinkers seem areas of disintegration. The collapse of an image of the self which was the counterpart to the 19th century ideology of the nation-state is for Catholics either stale or positively good news. On the one hand we have always believed that our identity is bound up with that of all other human beings, that we have all sinned in Adam and been redeemed in Christ — and not by the coincidence of a myriad individual choices, but collectively — and on the other hand we have always believed that our life is hid with Christ

in God and that our temporary personal self-awareness may be a very poor guide to the state of our soul. In future therefore I look forward on the one hand to a strengthening of our awareness of global responsibility — of the extent to which we are made up by structures relating us to millions of people we have never met — and so of the need to make individual choices in the context of a global ethic. That will not be a matter just of decisions to boycott Nestles, to become a vegetarian, or to subscribe to CAFOD. We may see, I hope we shall see, a new interest in Kant's principle that our personal moral life acquires content and purpose only in so far as it is directed towards the establishment of permanent international peace. On the other hand I expect there will be a revival of the doctrine of the soul, as something quite distinct from self-consciousness or the subject: the doctrine that our identity lies in the good things that we do, perhaps in the virtues that we acquire, something more akin to the notion of *dkarma* than of the ego.

And finally I expect that future generations of Catholics will see a great reconciliation with Protestantism. The theology of the spirit, which Hegel rightly saw as the distinctive new impetus which the Reformation gave to human development, the radical following-through of the belief that God speaks in and through us, has more work to do in the Catholic Church than further the charismatic revival. The work of Protestantization — that is the work of Reformation without schism — begun by the Council of Trent and continued by the Second Vatican Council, is not remotely complete yet. We may expect many more idols to fall, many more absolutes to pass away, as the Church takes on its global responsibilities and the accretions of the last 500 years are weighed and sifted. We shall learn to see God in the human world we have made for ourselves now, and not only in some past golden age — in the Christianity of the catacombs, or the Middle Ages, or the recusant period. But at the same time our Catholic belief that we are but creatures, and the creatures of a wholly unknowable God — a belief so firmly upheld by the Blessed Thomas — will I hope continue to safeguard us from self-worship and maintain us in the conviction that nothing we know in this world is ultimate — not the media of communication, nor the system of signs, nor even the end of history.