

## POST-SECULARITY, HEGEL AND FRIENDSHIP: An Interview with Graham Ward

*Ian Warlick*

**IAN WARLICK [IW]:** I wanted to start out with a bit of a “softball” question but one that I think has some serious meaning. In *Politics of Discipleship*, in the beginning, you talk about how good writing has to go beyond saying “what’s my thesis” to the question of “what am I trying to do with my thesis?”<sup>1</sup> When I was taught to write, the question was always “so what?” as in “why do we care about your thesis?” What is the “so what?” value to theology, why should people outside the Church or outside that department in the University pay attention to theology?

**GRAHAM WARD [GW]:** I think I’d turn the question around in some ways and instead of asking, “Why should people be interested in theology?” and say, “theology should be interested in everything.” So whatever is interesting people theology should be interested in. When you’re sitting down and writing as a theologian one thing that came across to me very clearly was that I don’t want to just write to other theologians.

When he was about ten I took my son to his first and only conference. It was in South Africa and I took him in fact because we could see something of South Africa together. He went to this first kind of open meeting of theologians and he

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*.

came back and said, “Dad, that’s a weird set of people. That’s a really weird set of people.” Now, I’m one of those weird set of people but I think I don’t want to just have a conversation with other theologians so I don’t want to write just for theologians. I want to write from my engagement with the world just like everyone else is engaged in the world. So I have the same kinds of things that other people enjoy doing. I mean you were talking about “The Wire,” so yeah, certain TV programs, I’m really interested in those programs. Theologians aren’t divorced from anything; theologians actually should be more actively engaged in the material culture in which they are participating. We’re not separate, we’re not purer, we’re not anything else.

In some ways the question is, when you write, what is your theology trying to do? A litmus test for me is when people say to me even when they don’t believe in my Christian perspective or they don’t believe in my theological catholic agenda, if they can recognize that the world I’m describing is the world in which they are living and so I’m just trying to respond to the same kind of world, then that’s the greatest kind of thing I can get. So it’s when students, particularly students, come up to me and say “really you’re interested in *American Psycho*? I thought that book was great.” And I think “yeah it is, I think it’s got some really interesting stuff in it.” So you begin a conversation in which theology emerges instead of in which theology is trying to dictate the terms on which the conversation is conducted.

**IW:** So for you theology doesn’t have to ask “is this my playground?” or “is this my area of study?”

**GW:** Absolutely not. I take from Aquinas in the opening question of the *Summa*. There is, for Aquinas, the sense that Theology, now he wouldn’t put it like this, it’s not just the queen of the sciences, but it’s the whore of the sciences. Queen of the sciences in so far as it caps them all but whore in so far as it has to trade on them all. Theology has no language of its own because we have no object that can we just simply claim. God isn’t an object in the world, so theology always has to borrow its language from other things. So, you know, while it has things which are ultimately significant for life unless it engages with just the ordinary

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stuff, the daily bread, if you like, then its not really dealing with life at all, its dealing with its own fantasies.

**IW:** Along the same lines, your work has highlighted the phenomenon of post-secularity, the growing re-emergence of religion in the public square—in fundamentalism, in popular culture and in the de-privatization of religion. Some of that presence, the fundamentalism, can be quite violent and on the flip-side some of the appearances in popular culture which are more benign can be a bit thin. How does ‘thick’ theology connect with the public at large?

**GW:** Lets first of all lest deal with that term, post-secularity. It’s not a term I would’ve used fifteen years ago. It’s a term that I’ve used only recently. But it’s the same kind of thing I was trying to do fifteen years ago in the opening of *Postmodern God* which was trying to say where are we.<sup>2</sup> What are the signs of the times? Are we reading where we are? It’s really important that theologians come to some kind of discernment as to where we are. One of the things where we are, we’re not where we were in the seventies and eighties with liberalism. That kind of liberal correlation with thinking is just not there anymore. So we’ve always got to be asking, “Where are we?” and “to what am I speaking?”

Post-secularity came up as a term that was being used, round about the time Phillip [Blond] brought his first book out, but then it got used more widely by Charles Taylor, Žižek, Derrida even Habermas. I don’t see post-secularity as the re-emergence of religion; I’ve always said that it’s the new visibility of religion. There are vehicles that make that visibility more visible. So for example, advanced telecommunication makes possible the kind of commercialization of religion that was never possible before. What we’re getting, through events like 9/11 or 7/7 or the massacre of Hindu fundamentalists by Islamic fundamentalists in India or Muslim fundamentalists by Islamic fundamentalists also in India is a massive mediafication. When you open the papers now there is recognition that if you’re dealing with Libya or Algeria, you’re dealing with a religious situation as well as a political situation. I see it as a new visibility.

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<sup>2</sup> Ward, “Introduction”, xv-xlvi.

Post-secularity is just a convenient name for the conditions we're living under today. As I said, the theologian has to be fully immersed in the situation in which we're living. It can't be some systematic, conceptual game in their head that links Trinity to incarnation that links incarnation to theological anthropology, theological anthropology to ecclesiology, etc. Of course you can make all those connections but if theology is going to have a transformative effect, it has to immerse itself in the material cultures. Post-secularity names something in the materiality we have right now.

**IW:** To narrow down the question, then, a lot of people have given theological readings of Harry Potter or the Twilight series but at the end of the day, even if Harry Potter appears as a Christ-like or Messiah figure, the theology of Harry Potter isn't orthodox or catholic. So how do theologians engage with the thin, sort religious, sort of spiritual things that are happening in culture?

**GW:** Let me take another take on that. When I introduced my take on Harry Potter, I got, not through reviews, reviews hardly picked it up but in private conversation people would say to me, "That's just entertainment! People have always been entertained by witches and goblins and stuff like that. That's nothing serious." My response is that, to say that, you're missing how serious entertainment is. We spend a lot of our time now with recreational activities. The kind of recreational activities that attract our attention are the kinds of activities that I'm interested in because I want to know what is making people tick, making people imagine, desire. What is it that people are wanting now?

Sometimes I give the analogy of the social body. If you take a biopsy, a probe to see what's operating well, what might not be operating well particularly cancer. With these kinds of events you can take a cultural biopsy.

What's going on it seems to me, from Harry Potter, is a whole kind of openness to... let's call it 'transfiguration'; whole new openness to enchantment. I'm not saying now that people necessarily believe in these things more than they did before although there is some evidence that, for example, belief in the existence of angels has gone up massively since the 1950's and 60's. What I am saying is that these things are indicative of certain kinds of desires that people

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have. Theology is still working in these same desires. The great hope in Harry Potter, the desire that keeps the whole thing moving is that things are going to improve. It's the same hope that put Obama where he is and it's the same hope that being dashed which is causing Obama the same kind of problems. We're all looking out for some kind of messianic figure, for some kind of deliverance, we can all see that the world is fucked up but we're all still hoping for something that can stop it from being so fucked up. What theology is doing is taking desires where they are at present, even if they are semi-neo-pagan in Harry Potter, and using it as a step forward in terms of the education and disciplining of the desires that people have. That's what we're involved in.

**IW:** I wanted to change directions here about. I was hoping we could talk about Hegel. As you point out in one of your articles Hegel just doesn't go away, even for Radical Orthodoxy.

**GW:** He certainly doesn't go away for me. I'd love to put Hegel to rest.

**IW:** What about his work keeps him from going away when it seems like some of the other 'bad guys', Kant or Descartes, for example, are easier dealt with?

**GW:** No, actually Descartes' not. Descartes can be put away if you just restrict yourself to the *Meditations* and the *Discourses* but once you actually read Descartes on the *Passions of the Souls* and you see that he's desperately trying to overcome the dualism that he's created he becomes a lot more interesting.

**IW:** Luce Irigaray has a wonderful essay about 'Wonder' in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

**GW:** Absolutely. There is a theology of wonder that in fact is found in the *Passions*. It's one of the key things. In fact, one of the basic emotions that neuro-

biologists have been looking is the emotion of wonder or surprise, of awe. It's quite interesting.

But, Hegel: Hegel won't go away because he begins his whole work, prior to becoming a philosopher—he does the exact opposite of Schleiermacher, Schleiermacher starts out as a philosopher and becomes a theologian and Hegel starts out as a theologian and ends up as a philosopher. Hegel's early philosophy is all about incarnation and the way you participate in the *logos*. When he develops that in terms of the way the Trinity is that which enfolds all things you can see why theologians can never let go of Hegel. What Hegel does with that, particularly when you get to *Phenomenology* and *Encyclopedia*, well, that's still up for grabs. I disagree with Cyril O'Reagan about this.<sup>3</sup> Cyril is a good friend of mine and we've had a lot of conversations about Hegel. Cyril's idea that Hegel is buying into the Gnostic myth emphasizes things in Hegel which I think are over-emphasized, for example the Hegel link with Jacob Böhme. For me, and Cyril recognizes this as a potential way of interpreting Hegel, you've got to interpret Hegel through Neo-Platonism. What I've been trying to do in an essay that comes out next year in *Modern Theology* is look at Hegel, through the eyes of *Logos* Christology. It works for his early work. What would be interesting would be how, and this would be just heresy in Hegel studies, you give a Christological reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

**IW:** I can hear Kojève spinning in his grave at the mere mention of such a thing.

**GW:** Yeah, yeah. More than Kojève though. People like William Desmond would also say “No, it's no good. We've tried that. It doesn't work.” I just think that somehow there's something perennial about somebody who is taking seriously the operations of God's providence in the world. I can't think of a theologian—well a philosophical theologian— as profound as some of Hegel's meditations on that topic. I'm very drawn to some of the things that are going on in Schleiermacher and I'm really drawn to the secret conversation that goes on between Schleiermacher and Hegel.

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<sup>3</sup> See O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*.

**IW:** If I can use perhaps inflammatory words for simplicity's sake, one might say that you have a more 'right wing' reading of Hegel than say, John Milbank or Conor Cunningham, who seem to follow the left reading of Hegel but then say "well, he's wrong."

**GW:** In fact I think they follow the Kojèvean reading of Hegel. I'm not sure though that mine is "right wing" as in "Right Hegelianism." Yes, Right Hegelianism did emphasize the theological side of his work and in fact it was Catholic theologians that recognized Hegel's power as a theologian after Hegel died. However, if you do look at people who are left wing, you look at Lukács for example or you look at Gillian Rose, they're already opening up theological questions. They're not exploring them, I mean Lukács wasn't even interested in them and Gillian Rose only became interested in them but they're still there in the early work.

**IW:** The conversation concerning Hegel that's gotten a lot of attention in the past few years has been Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ* and *Paul's New Moment*.<sup>4</sup> I'm wondering how your reading of Hegel might complicate that debate, especially next to Žižek who wants to see Hegel bring about this death of God.

**GW:** To me that's not Žižek. That's Kojève. That's just an outworking of the Kojèvean thesis. I don't find anything original in Žižek about Hegel; nothing at all. That Hegel is ultimately nihilistic, that he collapses the divine into the immanent, all that you can find in Kojève. You can even find it before Kojève. Marx's *Das Kapital* could not be written without Hegel.

I reject that. I can actually demonstrate the Hegel is not a follower of Spinoza in that way. Hegel rejected that, he also rejects notions of the collapse of the

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<sup>4</sup> Milbank and Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ* and Milbank (et.al.) *Paul's New Moment*.

transcendent into the immanent. I can demonstrate that from the *Encyclopedia* and from the *Philosophy of Religion*.

**IW:** In your essay ‘The Grandeur of Reason and Hegel’<sup>5</sup> you mention Hegel’s Lutheranism. Is that why, at the end of the day, Hegel’s a bit of a heretic? Did his Protestant education not get him in touch with the richer Catholic doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity?

**GW:** Absolutely! This is the great tragedy that happens with 19<sup>th</sup> century theology and the divide between the Catholic faculty from the Evangelical faculty in Germany. They never recognized how much they needed each other. They never recognized what the Finnish school are increasingly recognizing which is the possibility of a Catholic reading of Luther’s theology. So for example, someone like Schleiermacher is in desperate need of a doctrine of analogy. His whole understanding of *Gefühl*, the closest translation of that you can get is in fact ‘attunement’, and to follow that through in terms of Schleiermacher’s understanding of our participation in Christ and our participation in God consciousness requires a doctrine of analogy but he just wasn’t in contact with the people who could have given him that kind of a doctrine.

The same goes for someone like Hegel. He needed more adequate Trinitarian theologies than were available at the time. Even one of the greatest theologians of Hegel’s day, who wrote on the Church fathers, particularly about *Logos* Christologies in late antiquity, still finds no place for talking about the Trinity. Yet, that is Hegel’s great rediscovery, that all things are founded in and through the Trinity. I mean that’s an astonishing thing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because even in Schleiermacher it’s something that’s relegated to the margins of doctrine, it’s not the center of doctrine. Hegel recognizes it as at the center of doctrine and yet he needs the Catholic interlocutors that would actually help him understand the Catholic nature of his own theology. That’s because at the time Catholicism was being seen as something of an ‘opt out clause’ for the Romantics. So a number of

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<sup>5</sup> Ward, “The Grandeur of Reason”, 232-63.



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the Romantics like Novalis and Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel, went over to Catholicism and that was seen as some kind of heresy that they made that move. So Catholic theology had a really rough time in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly in Germany when in fact you really needed it.

The same thing happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. When Karl Barth had his encounter with [Erich] Przywara they could have learned a lot from each other but they chose to go in two diametrically opposed directions. In fact, even today, if you go to Bonn University today you've got the Evangelical faculty on floor one and the Catholic faculty on floor two and none of the two will meet. That's the real tragedy. That's the tragedy and John [Milbank]'s right to say that the Anglo-Catholic, the traditions of the Church of England having been trying to maintain the balance between the Catholic and the Protestant and that you need the two in order to have an adequate theology. Otherwise your theology is actually one sided at the end of the day.

**IW:** So you think we're at the point now with a sensibility like Radical Orthodoxy that we can re-Catholicize someone like Kierkegaard or Luther or Hegel?

**GW:** Luther's already been re-Catholicized by Finnish interpreters of Luther. One of the great hopes of Radical Orthodoxy—and you'll know that from some of the things I've said that I'm skeptical of some of commercialization of the name Radical Orthodoxy that have taken place—the idea that its some kind of movement I find rather alarming. Nevertheless, the one of great hopes of Racial Orthodoxy is that it can open up ecumenical discussion. It has, and this must finally be its greatest witness, that it has in fact been able to get conferences on Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed tradition, Radical Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, Radical Orthodoxy and Eastern Orthodoxy. I cannot think of any other Christian theological movement that has opened up those questions in those different traditions and show that it can work across traditions to actually think through an adequate Christian theology.

**IW:** It seems to me that Jamie Smith's work in America trying to bring Calvin and RO together are quite a bright spot then.

**GW:** It was a fantastic time we had with Jamie when we did that conference, Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed tradition. I will always remember, when I was expounding the Christian doctrine as far as I understand it of the Trinity as it relates to the Incarnation and the Sacraments and somebody said from the back "I see nothing in what you've said that Calvin would disagree with" and I thought "That's amazing" and realized I need to go back and re-read Calvin.

The other one, though, was exactly opposed. This person got up and said, "Everything you're talking about, about hermeneutics and mediation is crap; we don't need any of it. We just need the word of God, the word God speaks to us." Having to then say, there are three people in the Trinity and scripture isn't the word of God. His response is to say "That's not true. The word of God is in the scripture, the scripture is the word of God." The scripture isn't Christ, not by any definition. Nonetheless, it was a great conversation.

**IW:** I'm hoping to come back to RO in a bit but for a while I'd like to switch to politics. One of the things that I found interesting in your work is that you give an account of the Kingdom of God and the Church and the State that refuses to let any of those three things get confused with any of the others. You won't let your readers conflate two of the terms or even all three. Is it fair to say, then, that partisan politics is a bit alien to the real Christian politics of the Kingdom?

**GW:** No, it's not. In fact the reason I really wanted to engage in politics is that you've got to be political. It goes back to what we were saying earlier on. I see theologians as immersed in the material. The material is not there to be avoided or transcended in any kind of sense that means to leave it behind. We're here. Our vocations are here and we're here in all the mess and fuck up that's actually here. That means that we've got to be engaged and any engagement is political. That means political engagements at party levels, even though there are

difficulties and in some ways compromises. Nonetheless, engagement is necessary and education is necessary.

I'm not sure whether I understand Phillip [Blond]'s Red Toryism but I do applaud getting involved in the political in a way that is actually talking to political parties. On a more micro level it's being involved in our local communities and all the politics of those local communities. What I don't want to do though is outline a political program, outlining a thesis or platform for a party. I'm not trying to start a new political party. What I think is that we should be involved the politics and the political parties which seem to speak to us of something of the Christian truth and to ensure that that gets a wider dissemination.

**IW:** You make a case for moving towards a certain kind of theocracy, not in the sense that we think of it now, the rule of a state by a religious body but in the sense that Christians are ruled by God. How would you compare that to William Cavanaugh's concept of Christian Anarchy?

**GW:** Bill's a good friend and I've had lots of conversations with Bill. Bill's politics seem to me to be a politics of interruption. So you offer interruptive practices within the political mainstream. I think that that is one way of doing it. It kind of also to me is a bit reactionary. Those of us who have been left-wingers in the past and who have had to stop being left wingers because all we're doing is offering critiques from the side and not getting involved in the mess—I want to be involved in the mess of it all not just give it resistant practices from the side. Resistant practices, what I call transformative practices of hope are actually not just working on the outside but on the inside trying to rework the inside. That's why I applaud Phillip for actually being involved in the Cameron government and trying to lead its more right-wing agenda into more traditional socialist areas. For example, he was speaking just last week in the *Times* or the *Guardian* about the need for workers to have much more ownership of the machinery and their involvement in the process. As a manager of quite a larger unit, getting the buy in from your workers is absolutely vital. If you alienate them and you work with that kind of alienation you're never actually going to transform the whole

culture from inside itself and show that in fact its teamwork and cooperation that actually get us where we want to go.

**IW:** There was an article to that effect in the *Times* today, in the business section today with business owners saying that you have to get your workers to feel like their part of a family.

**GW:** Absolutely! I have 250-300 staff members working for me and 3,500-4,000 students and if we're going to function optimally as an organic unit, we all have the same aim; we all want excellent education that actually adequately prepares people for employment afterwards. That's a shared aim and we have to do that as a team and it can't be some kind of alien management that is top down.

With respect to Bill I think that resistant practices have their place. We will always need resistant practices. At the same time there has to be a place for being involved, for accepting certain situations and political limitations and being involved in practices that will actually change things from within. However, all of this is tempered by the awareness that we're moving towards judgment—an awareness that this is contingent and that we're dealing with certain forms of ignorance. To me this is straight Augustine, it's just *Civitas Dei*.

**IW:** Let's talk a bit more about RO. It seems to me that what this interview has shown is that people who claim that label, or have at some point claimed it, vary widely. In that sense RO isn't really a movement. However, to look back on RO, it's been 12 years since the first collection was published and this interview is appearing in a journal bearing the name Radical Orthodoxy. What do you see the accomplishments of RO so far and where it's going next? What are the questions it needs to ask and the areas it should be exploring?

**GW:** One of its great achievements, and it's not divorced from ecumenicism we talked about earlier, is what I would call an ethic of friendship. It began in friendship, the friendship between John and Catherine and myself—which is as

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strong now as it ever was which means that we have the means to be critical of each other without the bond of friendship ever being broken in that. I'm sure they see the limitations in my work and in me as a person and I know I've been critical of their work. Nevertheless, the friendship remains.

Now the great achievement has been that this friendship has multiplied, partly because it drew in students immediately, students who felt that they were intellectually curious and students who were unsatisfied with how things were presented to them before. I've had students from Fuller [Theological Seminary] who were beginning to come to the end of certain evangelicalism and enter to a kind of 'Emergent Church'; I've had students from Calvin College. All of them though have recognized that things are changing, that the old lineaments of Catholic versus Protestant, Evangelical versus Liberal—these labels no longer pertained and should not pertain. These students are saying, "I was brought up in a certain tradition and I'm starting to see the limitations of that tradition. I want to open my self up to new, different possibilities." It's always been a place where people can come and reside for a while and then they can choose, this is why it can't be a movement for me, there isn't a belonging. The belonging is open to everyone for however long they like. They take from it what they want and then they go to wherever it is they want.

A lot of students, particularly the American students I've had, have all found it hard to find a tradition to belong to after. I remember going to give a talk at a seminary in Vancouver which was quite Evangelical. A number of the students were interested and wanted to learn more. It was something they hadn't heard before, it was being proclaimed in the name of Christ in a way that recognized but it was a different kind of proclamation that resonated but they didn't really know much about it. When I talked to them they said "I'm thinking about coming over to the Catholic Church," or "I'm thinking about becoming an Episcopalian," "I'm thinking about joining the Greek Orthodox Church." They were all in transit; they were recognizing some of the limitations of their own tradition and realizing that there were far broader horizons, more profound horizons to which they could actually associate themselves. I think that's the great hope of the ecumenicalism, not that there will be one and we'll all agree on everything but that there can be an openness and that we should know that none of us own the tradition.

So for me it's that ethic of friendship and the conferences that Conor [Cunningham] has staged are a great testimony to that. The people who have come in have been antagonistic and others are sort of "please, where are the forms, I want to sign up" but they're all just enjoying being together and the level of conversation. They've all learned something that they can take back and there isn't any sense that you have to do 'this' with what you take back or a sense that "this is what you should do." It's an ethic of friendship that should inform moral behavior not demand certain kinds of behavior or ecclesial allegiance.

**IW:** Moving forward, then, do you think the most important thing is to preserve that ethic of friendship rather than lay out a program of questions to answer?

**GW:** It's not a program of questions to answer. There are certain things that emerge and the emerge through the time and demand a theological answering whether that be New Atheism or the re-Christianization of capitalism after the crises we're going through financially at the moment. There will always be new agendas arising, new situations arise but it shouldn't ever be programmatic and that ethic of friendship and listening and debating has to remain. If it has a wider future then it should be in facilitating those wider conversations because we're all answering the same kind of questions. What is it to be theological? What is it to be engaged in a theology in both theory and practice that is transformative for the world we live in?

**IW:** Another retrospective question then for you. Your 'Cities' trilogy has wrapped up.<sup>6</sup> Looking back on the whole trilogy what did you accomplish with that and the descriptions you gave. Also, where is your research going to take you next?

**GW:** I began my studies in literature in English and French. One of the things that became clear to me in English studies is that the author never owns their

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<sup>6</sup> Ward, *Cities of God*; idem, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*; idem, *The Politics of Discipleship*.

work. The author has a certain take on their work but they aren't the last word on their work. So I don't know what I accomplished. I know what I wanted to achieve which was to get theology immersed in the culture we're actually living in and answer some of the questions of that culture we're living in. Since most of us are living in an urban environment than that begins in the city. It begins with the way urban planning informs our living, shapes our affections, all those things are very important. How the cultures in cities do the same things. That's what theology is trying to do, inform behaviors, inform affections. Whether I succeeded in that, we'll have to see. As I said, for me the greatest compliment for me is "I recognize the world you're speaking about." Even if they don't agree they recognize the questions being raised and the approaches being made is the kind of approach they find themselves happy with. The best kind of appreciations I've had are those people that recognize that I'm trying to do an engaged systematic theology, a systematic that isn't abstract, its not about theologic in its purest form, its about engagement with the world in which we live in.

Where will I go next? I'm working on two volumes, the first of which will come out in a few years time because I've got to finish it by next year called *Ethical Life*. That's where Hegel becomes really important. It's a rethinking of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, correcting what I see as some of Hegel's heresies or un-orthodoxies but trying then again to talk about how do we move towards understanding and developing an ethical ethos in which the goodness of God is made manifest.

**IW:** And the second volume?

**GW:** They're both called *Ethical Life*. The first is called "Radical Incarnation" and the second volume is called "The Vision of God."

**IW:** Thank you very much, Professor Ward, for talking with me and answering these questions.

GW: It's been a pleasure.

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