

Introduction

Hegel in a Protestant cultural context

Any number of students of Hegel's thought have noted that he grew up in a Protestant culture.¹ Few of these students, however, have thought it necessary to explain how different one Protestant culture could be from another among the congeries of states that comprised "the Germanys" in the eighteenth century.² That, I think, is because most scholars have rather uncritically accepted the argument that Hegel's idealism is "the last great expression" of a German cultural tradition that has its religious roots in Protestant "inwardness" and its political roots in subordination of the individual to state authority.³

In this introductory chapter, I wish to show how misleading this view is as a point of departure for the study of Hegel's thought. Although in some general sense Hegel's origins were indeed German Protestant, they were rooted more specifically in a Protestant culture that, because it was ruled by a Catholic duke, could neither counsel nor countenance the values that governed the relation between religion and politics elsewhere in Germany. On the contrary, for most of the eighteenth century the Protestant culture of Old-Württemberg was governed by an ideal of civil piety that required extensive political vigilance vis-à-vis an absolutizing and catholicizing duke.⁴ It is the dynamics of this particular Protestant culture, not some "global" German one, that we need to reflect upon if we are to understand Hegel's origins.⁵ The argument of this chapter moves toward that end.

1. The "old man" as schoolboy

The first twenty-four years of Hegel's life have posed something of a problem for students of his thought. Most of his biographers have duly noted the paucity of evidence and information that have come down to us from these, his "schoolboy years" – a period that runs, say, from Hegel's

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entry into the lower division of the Stuttgart *Gymnasium Illustre* in 1777 to the completion of his studies at the University of Tübingen in 1793.⁶ Part of the gap in our knowledge about these early years is directly attributable to Hegel himself. A man of protean intellectual interests, always ready to talk or write on any subject, Hegel unfortunately never deigned to discuss or write about his own origins, intellectual or otherwise.

Moreover, there is little in the way of commentary from contemporaries to corroborate suspicions about the goings-on of these years.⁷ Like his equally famous co-Württemberger Schiller, Hegel left little personal information: we have only a few anecdotes and vague recollections from a sister, Christiane, to help fill the gaps in the record.⁸ We do, of course, possess a collection of documents in Hegel's hand that date from this period.⁹ This body of evidence includes some sporadic entries that – in the manner of schoolboys of the period – Hegel made in a *Tagebuch* (diary) between June 1785 and January 1787;¹⁰ several essays and some materials that were prepared for classroom presentation between 1785 and 1793; and numerous excerpts from academic journals and books that Hegel apparently had read during these years and wanted to preserve for future scholastic references.¹¹ But for the most part this evidence is fragmentary, thematically disjointed, and not easily related to the problem scholars have posited as central to an understanding of Hegel's "mature" philosophical outlook.

With only these sources to draw upon, scholars have been reluctant to read too much intellectual significance into the schoolboy period.¹² The available evidence, it has been pointed out, simply will not support any broad generalizations about the formation of Hegel's early intellectual outlook.¹³ Still, when pressed – as scholars invariably are – to explain the importance of this period for Hegel's intellectual development, his biographers have elected to approach the period in terms of Hegel's personality and its relation to his "method" of thought.

To this end, Hegel's biographers have remarked – almost to a man – upon the "objective" character of the schoolboy documents.¹⁴ Karl Rosenkranz, Hegel's first biographer, was quick to note the careful, measured, and modest intellectual quality of these early academic exercises. Since then, Hegelian scholarship has elaborated on Rosenkranz's observation and used it to substantiate the claim that from an early age Hegel was inclined toward a life of scholarship.¹⁵ How else explain the unpretentious, thoroughly controlled, and almost detached academic quality of the essays; the meticulousness manifest in the organization, indexing, and cross-referencing of the excerpted material; the attention lavished on books assiduously secured for the "private" library of a boy of eight?

Furthermore, Hegel scholars are at one in maintaining that while these early schoolboy exercises do not presage the originality and genius of later

years, they do manifest concerns that are studiously precocious – at the very least they are not those of a “typical” schoolboy (then or now).¹⁶ After all, as Christiane has told us, Hegel was a model student.¹⁷ In fact, he was valedictorian of the class that graduated from the Stuttgart Gymnasium in 1788, an honor that earned him an all-important third-place ranking in the “promotion” that entered the University of Tübingen in the fall of the same year.¹⁸ And it certainly was no accident that Hegel’s *Kommilitonen* (schoolmates) made light of his diligence, reliability, and respect for traditional *Bürger* values and standards of behavior by tagging him with the nickname “the old man,” the same nickname contemporaries gave to J. J. Moser, who, during Hegel’s youth, was the epitome of “Old-Württemberg” values.¹⁹

This biographical preoccupation with Hegel’s early propensity for scholarship and his “overly normal” personality has prompted several scholars to add a speculative broad brush stroke to the imperfect character sketch that has come down to us from the schoolboy period.²⁰ For these scholars, a deeper significance may be drawn from study of the labored and self-conscious academic “works” of these years. According to this view, Hegel in his youth was not a homogeneous or original thinker, as were his Tübingen companions Schelling and Hölderlin.²¹ Compared with the intuitive genius of these two thinkers, Hegel’s was a reflective intelligence. For that reason, Hegelian scholarship has hypothesized that Hegel’s objectivity was part of an effort to try to compensate intellectually for a personal deficiency – for a lack of imagination that was reflected in a natural disposition toward “boyish pendency.”²²

To support this conjecture, these scholars note how Hegel was academically mature beyond his years. They note how he liked to pass time with older men (when possible, with his teachers), walking and discussing intellectual issues,²³ and how he showed respect for the integrity and authority of traditional ideas and values as well as for the claims of new ones. Above all, however, they point to Hegel’s patience, which stood in marked contrast to the impulsiveness and daring of Schelling and Hölderlin. The long and tedious hours Hegel spent excerpting material on subjects that interested him demanded a patience, perseverance, and discipline of mind that was highly unusual for a boy his age. He was old beyond his years, as it were. Moreover, his willingness to think through problems from every conceivable point of view – indeed, his entire manner of thought – gave every indication of a scholar in the making. These traits did not always endear Hegel to his more impetuous and playful classmates, however; for whatever the subject, whatever the consensus, the old man could find a way to complicate the simplest matter. Thus, at Tübingen, his fellows bestowed upon him and his overly cautious academic ways the title of “*lumen obscurum*.”²⁴

Hegel, then, was a slow developer; and he had a plodding intellectual style to match – which meant that the “reflective” and “objective” cast of his mind compelled him to develop a high tolerance of the opinions of others. Only after broad exposure to, and thorough immersion in, the problems that exercised his youthful intelligence did Hegel think it proper to venture an intellectual determination of his own. Thus, scholars have argued, the content of the schoolboy exercises is more a “notional” than a “real” expression of his early intellectual views: it is indicative of the *direction* of his interests, not of his opinions per se.²⁵ And since Hegel did not give “real” assent to these ideas, it is impossible to reduce them to a consistent intellectual position. Hence, they reason, the hard core of Hegel’s youthful intellectual convictions lies less in the content than in the form of these early writings – in the spirit of inquiry that animates them, and in the systematic and scholarly way Hegel set about the task of framing intellectual problems and faithfully representing the opinions of others. Their conclusion: if there is any hidden long-range significance to be gleaned from these documents, it is to be found in what Hegel’s method tells us about his personality.

Hegel’s intellectual openness, his sense for the nuances of problems, and his tolerance of the ideas of others meant that he often began an intellectual endeavor by acquiescing in the say-so of others. But rather than raise questions about his originality, Hegel’s dependence on the work of others has invited scholarly speculation about what sources were crucial to his early development. After all, since as a youth Hegel was allegedly a passive borrower of ideas of other thinkers, it would seem to follow that an acquaintance with his reading may cast light on the issue of his intellectual development.

This concern with Hegel’s literary experience – which has been greatly enhanced by the availability of the excerpted material – is of a piece with two important developments in twentieth-century Hegelian scholarship: the study of the intellectual influences on his thought during its formative years and the study of the chronology of his writings. Actually, an overview of the *raison d’être* behind each historiographical development suggests the following convergence of scholarly interest. Because Hegel was a reflective thinker who arrived at his intellectual determinations slowly, it is possible to explain his development in terms of the assimilation of the thought of certain key thinkers, for far from setting his own terms of intellectual debate, Hegel generally followed the leads of others. As a matter of course, Hegel read widely and in scattered sources. But we know by his own admission that he found the work of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling most stimulating. Taking Hegel at his word about his admitted sources, many scholars have held that the emergent and evolving thought patterns of German idealism were crucial to his development.²⁶ As they argue the point, Hegel fell under the successive influences of Kant,

Fichte, and Schelling before bringing the *Entwicklungsgeschichte* of German idealism to its culmination, and its close, in his own work. The assumption of these studies is clear: Hegel's development from the schoolboy years, through young manhood, and down to the *Phenomenology*, recapitulated the philosophical movement of German idealism as a whole. In that respect, these studies hold that the coherence of Hegel's development is intellectually best understood in terms of an "idealist in the making."

Studies of the chronology of Hegel's writings have led to similar conclusions.²⁷ According to these studies, the most obvious changes in Hegel's thought during these early years occurred after his reading of something new in the writings of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling. Beginning with his encounters with problems in the philosophy of Kant while at Berne (1794–1796), Hegel allegedly moved from one philosophical system to another – from Kant's to Fichte's and from Fichte's to Schelling's – before, finally, moving from Schelling's to one of his own making. Again, the argument is that Hegel's development is best understood internally – as a series of changes rooted in the systematic, philosophical correction of the method of one idealist's thought by another. Thus, here too the tie between Hegel's development and the successive historical stages in the unfolding of German idealism is preserved.

Needless to say, the studies that have demonstrated the correspondence between the major turns in the pattern of Hegel's biobibliographical development and the ingress of Kant's, Fichte's, and Schelling's ideas into his thought fit in rather well with the tendency to emphasize the methodological significance of his schoolboy personality. Ostensibly, Hegel's propensity for objectivity made him susceptible to the influence of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, the dominant thinkers of the period, and the combined impact of their influence was reflected in the course of his philosophical development into a full-fledged idealist. Even more important, though, this convergence of historiographical interest makes it possible to read the "method" of the schoolboy period into the early works and to argue that the continuity of development between the two periods constitutes the essence of a coherent intellectual outlook: namely, that which expressed itself in the idealism of the "young Hegel." And from this it follows that the "logic" of Hegel's development is the same as that of German idealism, and is best apprehended systematically, as the gradual application, refinement, and extension of the methodological principles of philosophical idealism to all areas of human experience.

2. The ideal of Protestant civil piety in Old-Württemberg

That, of course, is an assumption we intend to question here. Despite its neatness, much about this approach to Hegel's thought is inadequate.

First of all, and aside from the overall tautological character of the Hegel – German idealism connection, the approach is inadequate on methodological grounds because it tends to reduce intellectual history to intellectual biography; and, as I have already observed, intellectual history involves (or should involve) more than that. It is not enough, I think, for the intellectual historian to proceed in a descriptive fashion – to know, in this case, what Hegel “said” on this or that matter, and when; what he read, and when he read it; which authors stimulated him and which did not; and where he stood in relation to the broader intellectual currents of the age. Standing on the shoulders of giants, Hegelian scholarship can today set its sights higher – that is, it can put its findings at the service of broader historiographical problems. Hence, our approach to Hegel will be expository, argumentative, and historical, and will be designed to show what is central and what is peripheral to Hegel’s thought, and why he borrowed from certain thinkers rather than others. In short, our approach will try to establish a “criteria of relevance” for Hegel’s borrowings by relating the problems he confronted in his early work to the cultural context in which he lived.²⁸

This brings us to a second reason the “idealist in the making” approach to Hegel is inadequate. It lacks a proper sense of historical context, of how circumstances of time (the late *Aufklärung*) and place (Old-Württemberg) shaped Hegel’s thought.²⁹ Admittedly, much can be learned about Hegel from a study of the Kant–Fichte–Schelling philosophical sequence. But Hegel was not born an idealist. Nor was he born a Kantian, or even a philosopher. Though he was a cautious and careful scholar, systematic, philosophical thought was something he learned over the years. Indeed, as a youth, he hardly possessed anything like a clearly delineated method of thought and exposition. In fact, during these years Hegel was eclectically casting about to discover and establish his own intellectual identity.³⁰ In this quest, however, it was the culture of Old-Württemberg, not the principles of German idealism, that furnished what Lucien Febvre would have called the “mental equipment” of his mind.³¹

To this end, we should remember that although Hegel is known primarily as a philosopher, he was basically a theologian *manqué*. He was trained in theology at Tübingen, and at a time when the university was polarized over the moral and religious implications of Kant’s philosophy.³² While the “Old Tübingen” school of theology, which was led by Professors Flatt and Storr, was attempting to use the skeptical dimension of Kantianism to preserve a belief in biblical supernaturalism, a younger generation of enthusiasts among the student body saw in Kant’s work the means to free mankind from both religious superstition and the clutches of the very orthodox church that supported it. As a consequence, Hegel’s chief intellectual concern in the 1790s was not so much with

philosophy as with theology. And that concern put Hegel in the main-stream more of declining eighteenth-century than of emergent nineteenth-century patterns of thought. So, if Hegel was early on a practitioner of methodological procedures that allow us to characterize him as a nineteenth-century idealist in the making, we must remember that it was toward resolution of the religious problems of Old-Württemberg that he directed these procedures. And by making these problems his own, Hegel became ipso facto a representative of much that concerned the "last generation" of Old-Württembergers.³³

Indeed, Hegel was born and raised in Old-Württemberg and had been nourished on its traditions; and in the eighteenth century that meant a great deal in terms of one's intellectual outlook. In the eighteenth century, to claim Old-Württemberg "origins" was to assert much more than one's *place* of birth. As Rürup has noted, Old-Württemberg connoted more than a *Heimat* (homeland): it stood for a tradition and way of life as well.³⁴ To put it simply, Old-Württemberg was a culture as much as a geopolitical expression, and to be raised there meant to be born into a climate of opinion that sustained and made intelligible the attitudes, values, and prejudices of a group of Protestants who, for political as well as religious reasons, thought about public life very differently than Protestants elsewhere in Germany.³⁵ For the most part these attitudes and values were articulated in a "structure of signification" that had "meaning-imparting" significance for the culture as a whole.³⁶ That structure, or "meaning complex," expressed itself in what I have called Protestant civil piety, a cultural ideal that was crucial to the "social construction of reality" in Old-Württemberg. This ideal gave focus and direction to the language, beliefs, shared traditions, and common activities of collective life, especially in the cities, where the possibility for political involvement in the affairs of Württemberg was greatest.³⁷

As a meaning complex, however, Protestant civil piety had both a religious and a political dimension; and each dimension existed as an independent tradition in the culture of Old-Württemberg. One of these traditions originated in the religious thought of Württemberg's "down-to-earth" pietists and was closely associated with their related conceptions of *praxis pietatis* and eschatological fulfillment in history.³⁸ The other tradition embraced the "Good Old Law" school of political thought and represented the convictions of the Protestant "patriots" who dominated the Estates of Württemberg and prided themselves on resisting their Catholic duke's attempted encroachments on the rights of the Protestant collectivity.³⁹

And yet, the ideal of Protestant civil piety was founded less on a conscious theory of how religion and politics should interact than on a tacit assumption, one that was the result of what Berger and Luckmann

would call a “process of habitualization.”⁴⁰ The assumption was that one of the basic functions of religion was to make men better by improving the ethical quality of civil life. With time this belief in the civil value of religion became part of the general stock of Old-Württemberg’s knowledge about itself.⁴¹ For the most part, however, this knowledge was part of the “pretheoretical lives” of Württemberg Protestants; that is, the knowledge was sharply patterned and had “meaning-imparting” force for them without being integrated into a single, consciously articulated system of cultural value.⁴² So, while the ideal of Protestant civil piety undoubtedly had its roots in religion, it also had a civil–political function. As such, it possessed many of the characteristics of what Frye might call a “myth” of collective religious concern.⁴³

In Part I, I detail what circumstances coalesced to make the interplay between religion and politics, down-to-earth Pietism and the Good Old Law, possible in Old-Württemberg. Suffice it to say here that the pietist doctrine of *praxis pietatis* had activist political implications and the Good Old Law, insofar as it safeguarded Protestant religious rights, had an obvious religious edge. Indeed, in Württemberg religion existed very much to reinforce politics; likewise, politics was very often seen as an extension of the individual’s religious personality. Our point, then, is that in the culture of Old-Württemberg in the eighteenth century religious and political impulses achieved a relative degree of “meaningful relatedness.”⁴⁴ That was because religion was concerned with something more than individual salvation; it was one of the sanctioning agents of civil piety as well.

Viewed in this way, public and private were interwoven in the culture of Old-Württemberg to the extent that they became part of the same equation of identity; of a *polis-ecclesia*, as one writer has perceptively termed it.⁴⁵ Individual personalities, to be sure, combined these impulses in various ways and in different proportions. J. A. Bengel, the father of down-to-earth Pietism in Württemberg, was more religiously minded than J. J. Moser, the main eighteenth-century spokesman for the Good Old Law; Moser, in turn, was more politically minded than Bengel.⁴⁶ But for much of the eighteenth century Württemberg managed to maintain something of a balance between the impulses, with the result that man’s political obligation to civil society took on religious significance and his religious commitments political importance.

Scholars have been slow, however, to recognize the importance of Protestant civil piety as a formative influence on Hegel’s thought. There are, I think, conceptual and historical reasons for this. The conceptual reason has to do with the way twentieth-century scholarship has approached the role religion played in the intellectual history of early modern Europe.⁴⁷ To that end, the modern conception of religion is premised on a

clear separation of church and state, of religion and politics.⁴⁸ This separation – which flies in the face of classical theoretical positions articulated in Durkheim’s and Weber’s sociologies of religion – invariably forces us to look in history for the sharp distinctions implied in present usage of the term. Moreover, the separation obliges us to regard any blurring of the lines between religion and politics as the result of “misplaced sacredness” (i.e., idolatry), of ideology (i.e., the use of religion to legitimate certain kinds of secular interests), or of the persistence of a cultural “residue” that is soon to be superseded because it is part of a transition period of historical development.⁴⁹

This separation of religion and politics reinforces a second assumption implicit in the modern conception of religion: namely, the identification of religion with the church. Indeed, the modern conception of religion equates it almost exclusively with “church religion,” with its “visible” or “objective” institutional manifestations.⁵⁰ This equation is all the more important because it reaffirms the separation of religion and politics. By equating religion with the church and juxtaposing that equation with the doctrine of the separation of church and state, this conception makes religion a matter of private rather than public experience. Altogether, then, the separation of church and state; the identification of religion with its most visible institutional manifestation, the church; and the association of religion with the private rather than the public realm of experience add to the difficulty of seeing any authentic or autonomous religious impulse in the public life of societies of the past.

Finally, and this is especially relevant to the study of religion in a Protestant culture, the modern association of Protestantism, Lutheranism, and Pietism with “inwardness,” “individualism,” and “subjectivism,” on the one hand, and with submission to outer political authority on the other, overlooks the fact that there was a strong, antiauthoritarian, civil impulse within the Lutheran religious tradition itself, especially in Old-Württemberg.⁵¹ And, as we shall see, the failure to appreciate the impulse toward “Protestant civil piety” in the culture of Old-Württemberg lies behind much of the confusion over the religious and political aspects of Hegel’s thought.

There are signs, however, that the modern conception of religion is changing; and our conception of the role of religion in early modern European history is also changing. Since the 1960s a revolution in the sociology of religion has occurred, for sociologists of religion have become ever more receptive to the theoretical insights of Weber and Durkheim, both of whom linked religion to many aspects of social life other than the church.⁵² As a result, it is no longer anathema to speak of religion as integral to man’s conception of nature, the state, or human history.

More specifically, this revolution has led to a new awareness of the civil

impulse in certain forms of Christian thought and of the “invisible” ways in which Christianity shaped man’s sense of the reasonable, the useful and practical, the ethical, and the educational in the cultures of early modern Europe and eighteenth-century America. Here the argument is that in certain of these cultures (e.g., England during the Civil War and America in the eighteenth century) the political dimension of human experience was invested with ultimate religious significance.⁵³ Hence, in these cultures participation in politics had a soteriological aspect; that is, political participation was deemed an important vehicle both in man’s transcendence of himself and in humanity’s salvation. Thus students of “civil religion” in America maintain that while today we distinguish between the religious, the political, the ethical, and the educational, many societies of the past did not. To that end, the sociologist Robert Bellah suggests that the concept “civil religion” allows us to talk about relations and clusters of problems that, while not part of our conceptual world, were doubtless part of the conceptual world of the past.⁵⁴ Civil religion, in short, is a designation scholars are currently using to point to the overlooked interpenetration of religious and political modes of thought and value in public life of past societies in general and Protestant cultures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular.

The possibility of talking about the existence of a reciprocal relationship between religion and politics makes the idea of civil religion conceptually relevant to this study.⁵⁵ What makes it historically relevant to this study is the fact that the ideal of Protestant civil piety was very much a product of just such a reciprocal relationship. Thus when I talk in this study about Protestant civil piety in Old-Württemberg I am referring to what may be regarded as a quite specific historical form of civil religion:

Another reason scholars have failed to give serious attention to the idea of Protestant civil piety is historical and is linked to the persistent notion that Lutheranism in general and Pietism in particular were reactionary and mystical religious movements centrally preoccupied to recover an “authentic” Christian faith by returning to a form of religious piety that required no worldly mediation.⁵⁶ Pietism, for example, is usually discussed in terms of a religious “revivalism” that gave expression to the inherent Lutheran penchant for religious subjectivism and otherworldly intellectual orientations.⁵⁷ Proceeding from this conception, it has been assumed that Pietism was indifferent or antithetical to the concrete and progressive aspects of eighteenth-century secular culture. Thus it is easy to see how scholars could simply ignore Pietism as an agent of progress and practical action in eighteenth-century thought.

Recent studies, however, have proved that assumption false, especially in Old-Württemberg.⁵⁸ Indeed, for Württemberg’s “down-to-earth”