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Hegel  
Religion, Economics, and the  
Politics of Spirit  
1770–1807

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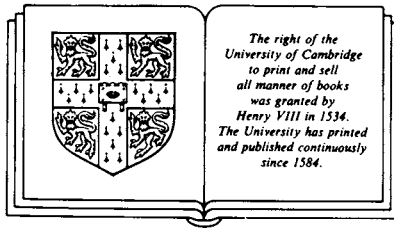
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# Hegel

Religion, Economics, and the  
Politics of Spirit  
1770–1807

LAURENCE DICKEY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1987

First published 1987

First paperback edition 1989

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Dickey, Laurence Winant.

Hegel: religion, economics, and the politics of spirit, 1770–1807.

(Ideas in context)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 1770–1831.

I. Title. II. Series.

B2948.D6 1987 193 87-711

ISBN 0-521-33035-1 hard covers

ISBN 0-521-38912-7 paperback

British Library Cataloging in Publication available

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Cambridge University Press

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## Preface

This study of Hegel began as a Ph.D. thesis in intellectual history at the University of California, in 1974. At the time, I thought my research project had a manageable focus: All I wished to do was make some historical sense of Hegel's intellectual development prior to the completion of the *Phenomenology* in 1806. Very quickly, however, I realized how naive my initial expectation had been; I discovered that a historical study of Hegel's development required a highly complex and elaborate explanatory structure. There was, I learned, much truth to Weber's distinction between *aktuelle Verstehen* ("direct" or "observational understanding") and *erklärendes Verstehen* ("explanatory understanding").<sup>1</sup> Or, to put it another way, I realized there was a difference between a philosophical explanation of the historical development of Hegel's thought and a historical explanation of his philosophy as a process of development.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, one could argue in commonsensical fashion that the best way to understand any thinker is to read him, but when it comes to Hegel that is not an altogether satisfactory procedure. For not all thinkers can be understood with equal ease, and this caveat is especially true of Hegel not only because of the density and complexity of his thought but also because he came out of a German and European cultural tradition that has become quite foreign to the twentieth-century Western mind. Thus, a beginning student is likely to find Hegel's thought almost incomprehensible on first reading.

Indeed, Hegel is a thinker who needs to be read with a discerning commentary alongside – better yet, with several such commentaries alongside. But here a problem arises: that of the interpretative diversity of Hegelian scholarship. Hegel, after all, was a genius, and he was protean. In addition, he was a "reader" – he read widely and in several subject areas. Consequently, his work has attracted the attention of scholars with a variety of intellectual interests. The result, as William Wallace noted

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long before the twentieth-century “takeoff” in Hegel studies, has been that “interpreters of his system have contradicted each other, almost as variously as the several commentators on the Bible.”<sup>3</sup> This means, in turn, that an engagement with the principal works of Hegelian scholarship leaves one with the impression that Hegel’s thought can have one meaning, and also several other different meanings all at once; and this impression encourages one to discount the possibility of ever discovering any particular historical coherence in his thought.

In view of this diversity of interpretation, one might well wonder if anything at all new can be said about Hegel’s thought. Of late, scholars have proposed to meet this hermeneutical challenge with the battle cry – “back to the text.” This, however, strikes me as an altogether inappropriate strategy for gaining new insight into the coherence of Hegel’s thought. For the argument that informs this approach presumes the “innocence” of a text and its meaning can be understood quite apart from considerations of historical context.<sup>4</sup> The key assumptions in this strategy are that a thinker’s work is an autonomous and self-contained object of inquiry whose meaning, if it is a “classic,” is “timeless,” and that, as a classic, it embodies a closed system of inner meaning which requires no outer references to be understood. According to this view, works of genius are of perennial relevance and only need to be read “line by line” and “over and over again” before they reveal the “essential meaning” of a thinker’s thought.<sup>5</sup>

For the purpose of developing a truly historical perspective on Hegel’s work much of the force of this argument is of dubious value, first, because it diverts attention from the historical question of Hegel’s relationship to his world and, second, because it completely avoids the matter of the existing interpretative diversity of Hegelian scholarship.<sup>6</sup> For the meaning of what Hegel “said” in any (or all) of his works has been construed in several different ways by a number of diligent, resourceful, and very talented interpreters. And that is not only because each generation of scholars is bound to rewrite history for itself but also because, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, a thinker’s work is “like a cube or volume in space”; it presents itself in several different “reliefs,” each of which offers a viewer a different perspective on the whole of which it is but a part.<sup>7</sup>

If this is true, and I think it is, then the meaning of Hegel’s work is not self-evident, and to insist that it is, and that the matter of the interpretative diversity of Hegelian scholarship can be resolved by returning to Hegel’s texts and by tightening up the rigor of the “logical analysis” of the ideas presented in them, is simply presumptuous and will lead to more controverted interpretation rather than to clarification of Hegel’s meaning.

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In keeping with these convictions, I have chosen to approach Hegel in another way. My guiding methodological assumption is that to explain the coherence of Hegel's thought as a developmental sequence we need to begin by giving a historical account of what he was writing about when his thought can be said to have begun to develop. And that means we need to know something about his origins.

Very often the point of departure for a discussion of a thinker's origins is biography. For reasons that are explained in the Introduction to this study, I have elected not to pursue that strategy. Suffice it to say an examination of Hegel's biography (as biography) does not help us explain much about what he was thinking and writing about in the late 1780s and 1790s – when he was a schoolboy living in the Duchy of Württemberg. Instead, I approach the problem of Hegel's origins by offering what Clifford Geertz would call a “thick description” of the world in which he lived.<sup>8</sup> That world was the Protestant culture of “Old-Württemberg” in the eighteenth century. Indeed, it is Hegel's experience of that culture – of its assumptions, preoccupations, and problems – that constitutes the point of departure for this study of Hegel's thought as a process of development.<sup>9</sup>

In Part I of this study I try to locate Hegel within this *context*. I do so in three different yet related ways. First, I emphasize that the Duchy of Württemberg was unique among “the Germans” in the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Second, I make the rather obvious point that this *setting* impinged on Hegel in varying ways.<sup>11</sup> So, rather than undertake a discussion of the history of all that existed in Old-Württemberg (i.e., *histoire totale*), I try to pinpoint what aspects of that *culture* were crucial conditioners of the young Hegel's thought.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, I examine the culture of Old-Württemberg in terms of two of its main traditions – namely, the religious tradition of “down-to-earth” Pietism and the political tradition of the “Good Old Law.” By so doing, I establish a cultural context within which Hegel can be placed.<sup>13</sup> Finally, I try to show that the interplay between the two traditions defined what Kenneth Burke would call the “circumference” of the young Hegel's thought.<sup>14</sup> Fundamental to this endeavor is the attempt to show that Protestant civil piety, a religiopolitical concept that was formed by the interplay between the two traditions, became a “core concept” in the development of Hegel's thought.<sup>15</sup>

In Part II I slightly shift the focus of Hegel's relation to the Protestant culture of Old-Württemberg. Thus, in Chapter 4 I emphasize how Hegel's writings of the 1790s revolved around the concept of Protestant civil piety. Indeed, in this chapter I show how the “spins” Hegel gave to his concepts of *Volksreligion* and *Sittlichkeit* reflected his abiding concern with the ideal of Protestant civil piety.<sup>16</sup>



Saying that much of what Hegel wrote in the 1790s can be explained in terms of his Württemberg origins would seem to imply that this is synecdochic study in intellectual history.<sup>17</sup> As such, the arguments of Parts I and II would seem to be susceptible to the charge of over-contextualization.<sup>18</sup> It could be claimed, for example, that I have allowed the context to “overwhelm” the thinker and, by so doing, have done an injustice to Hegel’s “genius.”<sup>19</sup> Obviously, I think that this line of criticism is unfair, for it misses the *historical* point of the problem of Hegel’s Württemberg origins.<sup>20</sup> The fact is that Hegel was a “representative” Württemberg thinker until some time in the 1790s.<sup>21</sup> He was not born a genius and probably only began to think like one when he started to reflect on the matter of the relationship between Protestant civil piety and the emergent socioeconomic and political forces he came to learn about in studies he undertook after having left Württemberg in 1793. It is at this point, I think, that Hegel becomes Hegel and his genius begins to reveal itself over time and independent of his Württemberg origins.

In Part III, therefore, the conceptual thrust of my narrative changes radically. That is because, as Hegel begins to relate his conception of Protestant civil piety to what R. D. Cumming would call his “other studies,” it is no longer possible to discuss his development unilinearly – as moving in a single direction and in terms of a sequence that begins in the culture of Old-Württemberg.<sup>22</sup> Previously, Hegel had allowed his core concept, Protestant civil piety, to shape other concepts in its image. From 1794 on, however, Hegel had to square Protestant civil piety with what he was learning from his other studies – that is, from what he was reading about “political economy,” “sociological realism,” and history in his Scottish sources (e.g., Ferguson, Smith, and Steuart).

In Chapters 5 through 8 I try to explain the adjustments Hegel made in his thinking in order to reconcile his religiopolitical conception of Protestant civil piety with those socioeconomic and historical studies.<sup>23</sup> Very briefly, the adjustments were of several kinds and unfolded more or less over the ten-year period 1794 to 1804. Up to, say, 1794, the idea of Protestant civil piety possessed something like absolute value for Hegel. Indeed, as a framework for experience it governed much of his behavior and expectations, to the extent that it could be said to have constituted his “second nature.”<sup>24</sup> There was, however, very little room within that framework for economic influences – which is to say that Protestant civil piety could function as an unquestioned cultural ideal for Hegel only as long as he remained ignorant of economics.

All that changed sometime in the mid-1790s, when Hegel “discovered the economy.” At that time his reading of the Scots convinced him that Protestant civil piety could not function as a motivational and cultural ideal as long as it failed to take account of the economy and the way it

shaped the dynamic of modern social life. To this end, I explain in Chapters 6 and 7 how adjustments Hegel made in his conception of *Sittlichkeit* reflected a larger effort to restate the doctrine of Protestant civil piety in a language and form that met the requirements of late eighteenth-century Scottish thought.

Here, it is important to note three things. First, throughout this period Hegel continues to talk about *Sittlichkeit* as a collective ethical idea. Second, although *Sittlichkeit* remains a constant concern in his thought during these years, the nature of that concern changes markedly after his discovery of economics. Whereas before 1794 Hegel had regarded *Sittlichkeit* as a universal prescription for all kinds of contemporary historical problems, he treats it after that date as an ideal that itself needs to be situated within a historically specific constellation of socioeconomic forces. Finally, we need to note that Hegel's decision to shift the conceptual context in which *Sittlichkeit* has been located does not necessarily entail abandonment of Protestant civil piety as a religio-political ideal. What happens is not so much the displacement of one theory of collective life by another as the relocation of *Sittlichkeit* in another context, one that had been articulated *on the level of theory* by the Scots. Hegel's problem, therefore, was not so much how to preserve the ideal of *Sittlichkeit* against the forces of the world depicted by the Scots as how to insinuate and ensure the persistence of *Sittlichkeit* in the kind of world they had described. Or, to put it differently, Hegel's problem was how to turn the arguments of the Scottish Enlightenment to the advantage of the religio-political ideal of Protestant civil piety.

Understanding the texts in which this shift in the context of *Sittlichkeit* occurs is complicated by two other problems. That Hegel accepted the main thrust of Scottish thought cannot be gainsaid. But there can also be no doubt that he had reservations about how the Scots viewed the triangular relation among economy, society, and politics. Specifically, the Scots had persuaded Hegel of the need for "objectivity" in the study of society; but within that framework Hegel resisted their tendency to treat man as a *social* being whose nature was essentially *economic*. So, while he admired the Scots for both their socioeconomic objectivism and their materialistic sense of history, he aimed from the start at altering the "modality" of their arguments, especially those that celebrated the naturalism and materialism of collective life.<sup>25</sup>

That this was Hegel's intention is clear from the ambiguity he deliberately built into his concept of *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, historically to appreciate Hegel's thought as a process of development depends in large part on understanding the way he synonymizes and then desynonymizes the terms "natural" and "*Sittlichkeit*" in his writings after 1800. In his Scottish mode, Hegel is quite willing to synonymize the two – that is, to

discuss the economy, its social implications, and the ethical life of the collectivity in terms of *natürliche Sittlichkeit*. In this mode, Hegel means to be objective, historical, contemporary, and so on. But the “modality” of what he writes about *natürliche Sittlichkeit* is governed by a hidden agenda, by a larger conceptual purpose, namely, to draw attention to the conceptual need to desynonymize the two terms. Here Hegel’s argument is that if the collectivity were ever to have the quality of a truly ethical life, it would have to create *within* the realm of objective experience itself a sphere of action designed to promote the realization of “true *Sittlichkeit*.” And although Hegel discusses this sphere in the conditional mode, there can be no doubt it was associated in his mind with *Sittlichkeit* qua the religiopolitical ideal of Protestant civil piety.<sup>27</sup>

When, therefore, Hegel begins to adjust his conception of *Sittlichkeit* to what he has learned from his Scottish studies, he simultaneously begins to develop not only a critique of the substance of those studies but an argument for the reconstitution of Protestant civil piety as well. There is, in other words, a “triple transition” taking place in Hegel’s thought from 1794 on. First, he is shifting the discussion of *Sittlichkeit* to a more “objective” context; second, he is criticizing *certain aspects* of the ethical life that obtain within that context; and, finally, he is manipulating that criticism so that it will lead to the reconstitution of true *Sittlichkeit* from a point of view *internal* to the “new” objective context itself.<sup>28</sup>

In many respects, the story of Hegel’s development between 1794 and 1804 pivots on the way he attempts to negotiate this triple transition. For that reason, it is important to hold each of the three “moments” of transition separate. To do otherwise, to collapse each moment into a larger “moment” of objective experience, would be to overlook Hegel’s realism and deprive his thought of much of its complexity and conceptual dynamic. Indeed, to do so would be to blur the distinctions Hegel made between the economic, social, and political dimensions of objective experience; and it is precisely Hegel’s sense of those distinctions and their relations with one another that explains why his thought developed the way it did after 1794.

Finally, in the Epilogue to this study, I offer some reflections on how the *Phenomenology* in general and the concept of “absolute *Geist*” in particular stand relative to the triple transition Hegel had tried to negotiate between 1794 and 1804. Here I attempt to show that this triple transition was not so much background to the *Phenomenology* as the mold in which that great book was cast. Even so, it is very difficult to decide whether the *Phenomenology* constitutes a fourth moment of transition in Hegel’s thought or a variation on the thrust and meaning of the arguments he had made while fleshing out the substance of the third transition. Clarification of much of the confusion about Hegel as thinker,

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I argue, depends on understanding what issues are involved in resolving that complex matter.

One last preliminary word, I think, is in order here. Because of my contextual commitments I have had to discuss a good deal of material that will strike the reader, at least initially, as not immediately relevant to the Hegel of conventional scholarship. This is especially true of Part I, where I have had to go back in time to the early Christian era in order to make clear the theological issues that exercised German Protestants in the eighteenth century. This procedure of “gearing up” in fifteen hundred years of Christian history to talk about Hegel is, I think, absolutely necessary if we are to avoid repeating the many errors past scholars have made in this vital area of Hegel scholarship. Moreover, what I have discovered in going over this history myself is that there were resources within the Christian tradition that Hegel drew upon to reconcile his religious commitments with his socioeconomic studies. A truly historical study of Hegel, therefore, must at some point gesture in the direction of this material. To do that conscientiously, in a way that does not simply reiterate conventional wisdom, requires working through the material carefully and in a manner that allows the reader to understand why the argument unfolds as it does. Part I of this study is designed to serve that pedagogical purpose. But so as not to overencumber the narrative, I have addressed a number of important issues of interpretation in the notes to the chapters that constitute Part I.

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## Acknowledgments

Finally, after so many years, I have the opportunity publicly to acknowledge the many institutional, professional, and personal debts I have accumulated while preparing this manuscript for publication. Early on, while working on this project as a graduate student, I received substantial institutional support from the University of California at Berkeley. I was privileged to attend that great public university both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student, and I was astonished that the university in general and the history department in particular always found ways to fund research and writing while I was a student there. Concurrently, I received generous support for dissertation work from the Council for European Studies (1974), from the German Academic Exchange Service (1974–75), and from the Mabel McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund of Stanford University (1978–79).

Subsequently, while preparing the manuscript of this book, I substantially rewrote the dissertation and, in the process, incurred many new institutional debts. To acknowledge them I should like to thank the Council for Research in the Social Sciences at Columbia University for supporting my work during the summers of 1981 and 1983; and the Spencer Foundation of Teachers College, Columbia University, for a summer grant in 1982. Above all, I owe a special debt of gratitude to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. While a member of the Institute's School of Social Science in 1983–84, I had the time, under the most favorable conditions, to write what amounts to Parts II and III of this study. I am deeply grateful, therefore, to the faculty of the School of Social Science, especially to Wolf Lepenies, for having invited me for the year. It was, for me, a most rewarding experience.

During both stages of the work I did on this manuscript, I received unwavering support and encouragement from two of my teachers – William J. Bouwsma and Martin E. Malia. All I can say about them is

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that, were it not for their examples and for the confidence they showed in me, this study would never have been completed. For personal as well as professional reasons, therefore, I dedicate this book to them.

I also feel a more general obligation to those who have read particular sections of this manuscript and have suggested ways to improve them. So, to Peter Brown, Julian Franklin, George Kelly, Majorie Reeves, Melvin Richter, and Quentin Skinner – thank you for your comments and for saving me from some embarrassing scholarly blunders. In addition, I wish to offer particular acknowledgments here to Reinhard Bendix, Hans Rosenberg, and Quentin Skinner. During my years at Berkeley, Bendix and Rosenberg were exceptionally generous to me with their time and with their extraordinary knowledge of German history. I am most appreciative of that. More recently, Quentin Skinner not only has extended many kindnesses to me but also has gone out of his way to encourage me in the Hegel project. And thank you, Quentin, for suggesting that Cambridge University Press might be interested in a study of this sort.

My indebtedness to colleagues and friends at Columbia University is at least as great. Were it not for their patience, advice, and pleasant company, I surely would have tried to rush this study into print. In particular, I owe special debts to Marc Raeff and Wim Smit for reading and commenting on large parts of the manuscript and for their constant goodwill. I would also like to thank J. Malcolm Bean, Michael Rosenthal, and Isser Woloch for general support and encouragement while I was bringing this project to term. And to the late Stephen Koss I wish to extend belated thanks for the many considerations he rendered me while we were colleagues at Columbia University.

Finally, I am grateful to Jacqueline Philpott and Dorothy Shannon for expert typing and editorial work during the time when I was preparing this manuscript. To Jacqueline, in particular, I am obliged for many things besides, not the least of which was a very special companionship that sustained me when I despaired of scholarship.