

THOUGHT AND FAITH IN THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF HEGEL

JOHN WALKER (editor)

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PHILOSOPHY OF HEGEL

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SPRINGER-SCIENCE+BUSINESS MEDIA, B.V.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thought and faith in the philosophy of Hegel / edited by John Walker.  
p. cm. -- (Archives internationales d'histoire des idées =  
International archives of the history of ideas ; v. 121)  
"This volume grew out of the 1987 Oxford conference on Thought and  
Faith in the Philosophy of Hegel!"--Pref.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-94-010-5422-5 ISBN 978-94-011-3226-8 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-94-011-3226-8  
1. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 1770-1831--Religion--  
-Congresses. 2. Religion--Philosophy--History--19th century--  
-Congresses. I. Walker, John, 1956-. II. Series Archives  
internationales d'histoire des idées ; 121.  
B2949.R3T54 1991  
200'.1--dc20 91-12989

ISBN 978-94-010-5422-5

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*Printed on acid-free paper*

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Originally published by Kluwer Academic Publishers in 1991

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1991

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## Preface

The purpose of this collection of papers is to introduce English-speaking philosophers and theologians to something of the variety of the contemporary debate about the religious relevance of Hegel's thought. It is published in the hope that it will appeal not only to specialised students of Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* but to a wide audience of scholars interested in Hegel's thought as a whole.

The volume grew out of the 1987 Oxford conference on *Thought and Faith in the Philosophy of Hegel*, but has since developed beyond the confines of the original conference programme. The programme of the conference consisted of five major papers on different aspects of Hegel's religious thought and its reception, followed by a somewhat shorter commentary delivered by another scholar in the same field. This basic format has been retained, but a number of the commentaries have been extended or rewritten and an entirely new piece by Kurt Meist has been commissioned for the purpose of this collection. The volume includes studies of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and the *Phenomenology*, as well as pieces dealing with the theological relevance of Hegel's philosophy of history and Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel. It concludes with an examination of the relevance of Hegel's doctrine of absolute Spirit to the modern defence of his philosophy as a whole.

The editor would like especially to thank the committee of the Hegel Society of Great Britain for making the 1987 Oxford

Conference possible, and Professor Michael Petry for encouraging publication of the volume and giving the project his support over a long period. Thanks are due also to Kurt Meist for agreeing to transform an informal commentary into a substantial and independent contribution, and to Nicholas Walker for translating Kurt Meist's contribution into English. I have also to thank the *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici* of Naples for permission to publish Professor Harris's essay *Hegel's Phenomenology of Religion*, a version of which is due to be published shortly in Naples.

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*January 1991*

## Foreword

When the idea of an Oxford international conference on Hegel's philosophy of religion was first mooted in the mid-eighties, it looked as though all we could hope to achieve was the drawing up of an inventory of established and entrenched positions. There seemed to be little chance of any genuine revival of interest in the subject. This particular conception of religion was rooted in a philosophical system formulated at a time when institutionalised faith was still a major cultural influence. The religious thinkers of the nineteenth century seemed to have worked out most of its main implications, – one either used it in order to re-think traditional Biblical exegesis and theology, or one made a point of consciously rejecting it in the interest of personal commitment, or one took it to imply that religion as a whole was in the process of becoming intellectually obsolete. It had to be admitted, moreover, that it was the last alternative which appeared to be winning the day. The marginalization of religious life in western society, the pressure upon it from the political establishment in the east, were trends which showed no signs of being reversed. The positive attitudes to religion engendered by Hegelianism seemed to be losing their basic source of inspiration. The entrenched positions were no longer the expression of a general preoccupation with religious issues. Investigating and discussing them certainly seemed to stand little chance of initiating any revival of interest in the philosophical system out of which they had arisen.

It was in full awareness of this background that John Walker went ahead with the preparations for the conference. I helped where I could, but I must admit that I had my doubts about the chances of success. It seemed to me that there was little point in attempting to call in question the given state of affairs. The pressing need in Hegel studies was not a reevaluation of his philosophy of religion. It was the same as it had been for the previous forty or fifty years. The system had to be shown to be capable of dealing responsibly and constructively with mathematics and the natural sciences. It was these disciplines, not religion, that were setting the tone in the modern world, and those intent on bringing out the contemporary relevance of Hegelianism ignored them at their peril. I had been teaching in Scandinavia throughout the sixties, and one experience from those years had had a decisive influence upon the way in which I then regarded this particular issue. While I was in Denmark, the Polish government had commissioned a body of young people to study the relationship between church and state in northern Europe. What interested them was the fact that in Scandinavia, where there was a long tradition of state support for the church, there was also a steady decline in church attendance and popular religion. In Poland on the other hand, where the state was doing all it could to make things difficult for the church, church attendance was increasing and popular religion was flourishing. I never heard what conclusions they eventually drew from their enquiry, but taking part in it made me think twice about the advisability of attempting to extract any very positive propositions from Hegel's philosophy of religion.

Events have overtaken us since the sixties and the mid-eighties. The entrenched positions of the nineteenth century are rapidly becoming blatantly obsolete. During the period in which John Walker has gone ahead with preparing these papers for the press, the whole political and intellectual scene has undergone a revolution, vindicating his original enthusiasm for the project in a truly remarkable manner. There are very good grounds indeed for maintaining that Hegel's philosophy of religion is directly relevant to a thorough understanding of the abandonment of communist ideology in eastern Europe, the resurgence of Islam. Philosophers in both Europe and America, especially in the context of the discussion

about post-modernism and the work of thinkers like Alasdair Macintyre, are beginning once again to consider the relevance of theology to the status of philosophical discourse itself. There is increasing evidence that the work of Hegel is directly relevant to this discussion from both a philosophical and a theological point of view, and the *Shadow of Spirit* conference held at Cambridge in the Spring of 1990 focused on this very theme. Whether Hegel's thought is also relevant to personal religious commitment and to the renewal of traditional Christian theology remains to be seen. It is, therefore, a matter of no small importance that the proceedings of this Oxford conference should now be made available to the public at large.

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