PART I

THE DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF AN ARISTOTELIAN IDEA OF THE GOOD LIFE, 1793 TO 1800
CHAPTER ONE

THE HUMAN SPIRIT AND FOLK-RELIGION:
THE TÜBINGEN ESSAY OF 1793

I. A Purpose Apart from Religion

The so-called Tübingen fragment or Tübingen essay is the first step in our project to grasp Hegel’s mature idea of the good life. Written in 1793, the year Hegel graduated from the theological college (Stift) at Tübingen at the age of twenty-three, it is his first philosophically important work. 1 The language and themes of the essay show the influence of the intellectual, cultural, and religious context in which Hegel was cultivated. While extensive work has been done to identify the specific threads of that influence, this approach is not the one we will take. Instead, this chapter is concerned with revealing Hegel’s animating Problemstellung—the way he internally sets up and frames his central question. We will show that underneath the language, categories, and ideas he employs is a project that is Hegel’s own. Even here the Tübingen essay is dominated by several themes: the need for religion to be active and lived, the importance of folk-religion, the excellence of the Greek polis, and the inadequacy of Christianity—if not the whole nature or genius of the West. These themes arise and gain their meaning from the work’s analysis of religion. For this reason the analysis of religion seems to provide Tübingen essay’s overt structure; religion itself seems to be its animating idea. Yet, when we try to reconstruct the logic of Hegel’s obscure analysis of religion in terms of religion alone, we will see that the work’s Problemstellung must lie elsewhere. 2

1 For a discussion of the manuscript’s dating and the likely location of its composition (Stuttgart) see H.S. Harris 1972: 119.
2 For a concise summary of the commentary up to the 1960s on Hegel’s youthful writings, see Hans Küng 1987: 23 n. 2. Since then, H.S. Harris (1972) preeminently, as well as Laurence Dickey (1987) and Stephen Crites (1998) have revisited Hegel’s youthful work in a sustained way.