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# Martin Luther and Modernity, Capitalism, and Liberalism

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## Summary and Keywords

The concept of modernity has emerged as a major philosophical, theological, and sociological category of interpretation in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It was meant to embrace fundamental changes to the fabric of Western culture, including the rise of capitalism, liberalism, democracy, and secularity. From its inception, references to Luther and the Reformation have been a frequent element of this kind of theory. The first major theorist of modernity in this sense was arguably Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, who set the tone of subsequent contributions by aligning modernity with subjectivity. For him, the religious dimension of this development was crucial, and he was explicit in his claim that it was the Reformation that brought the turn to subjectivity in the realm of religion. A side effect of the turn to subjectivity was the alienation of the subject from the world. Modernity is thus deeply ambivalent, and so is Protestantism. Later thinkers developed these insights further, but also criticized the identification of Luther with the origin of modernity, pointing to continuities between his theology and earlier, medieval thought.

Keywords: modernity, subjectivity, alienation, vocation (Beruf), antimodernism, immanentism, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, Albrecht Ritschl, Ernst Troeltsch, Jacques Maritain

# Modernity: A Controversial Concept

Attempts to understand the specifically “modern” character of western European civilization were originally prompted by the epochal challenge of the French Revolution and the ensuing transformation on a monumental scale of all aspects of human life, the demise of ancient institutions, and the emergence of novel political, social, and cultural paradigms across Europe and beyond. These reflections never happened in a vacuum but were always part of the search for new forms of identity necessitated by this and subsequent historical crises. Inevitably, theories of modernity have varied radically in



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almost all aspects; divergent views have been held on the origins, the character, and, naturally, the very desirability of “modernity.” The religious dimension has not always featured heavily in those accounts, but given the evident significance of religious attitudes for modern developments—the anticlericalism of the revolutionaries in France and elsewhere, the antimodernism of the popes, the apparent “secularization” throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—many or most theorists of modernity have relied heavily on the assumption of a close connection between religious transformations and so-called modernization. And where this has been the case, the Reformation, and more specifically the person of Martin Luther, have often been perceived as their vanishing point.

In fact, many have gone further and suggested that Luther stands at the origin of modernity and was, for better or worse, a major force in bringing about that fundamental change of direction in the history of the West. On face value, this idea seems counterintuitive. After all, there was a form of early modernity in existence in the 16th century, but it was located in Italy and on the Iberian Peninsula, not in Wittenberg. Against the economically highly successful Fugger family, Luther polemicized on the basis of a “peasant’s mistrust of capital,” as Max Weber has called it.[1] In fact, until the 18th century Europe’s most “modern” countries were predominantly Catholic. Things changed in that regard from the turn of the 19th century, however, when the baton of modernization was increasingly handed from France to Britain, Germany, and eventually the United States. It is therefore arguable that the historical coincidence of the watershed of the French Revolution with the rise of the major Protestant powers is one reason for the tendency to evoke Luther and the Reformation in connection with the rise of modernity, given the 19th-century provenance of many of those theories.

Another factor may well have been the importance of confessional differences during a period that has been called a “second confessional age.”[2] Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th, the opposition of Protestant vs. Catholic was crucial for European identity formation. In this situation, theories connecting Luther with the origin of modernity suited very different groups of people. It was compatible as much with the affirmative pride of liberal Protestants seeking to justify their faith by aligning it with the emerging modern world, as with the skepticism of Catholic observers critical of the modern world and consequently quite content to ascribe its initial impulse to the Reformer.

Before any detailed attempts to link Luther with the emergence of the modern world can be investigated, it is necessary to sketch underlying understandings of modernity. Two in particular are pertinent for the present context. Both take the widest possible view of the phenomenon, seeking to capture the essence of modernity as spanning political, social, scientific, and economic transformations as well as religious changes.



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Perhaps the single most influential narrative aligns the rise of modernity with a shift of emphasis from human collectives to the individual. According to this view—which allows for various permutations and variations—the most central aspect of Western modernity is its insistence on the priority of the subjective experience of the individual person. This tendency can be seen in the political sphere as a growing recognition of individual rights as constitutive of political order; in philosophical systems giving epistemological or even ontological precedence to the subjective standpoint; in the emergence of the creative authorial subject as the focal point of aesthetics; or again in an understanding of religion based fundamentally on the faith of the individual person. Not surprisingly, this narrative permits more than one interpretation. The classical liberal reading sees this development as one of unmitigated progress, allowing for the political, social, and cultural acceptance of an increasing diversity of individual preferences, as perhaps still best illustrated by the alignment of the liberal cause with Jewish emancipation during the 19th century. Yet a more skeptical interpretation is certainly possible and has, in fact, dominated in times of social crisis. According to this view, modern individualism undermines the bond holding society together, leading to atomization and so—in Emile Durkheim's classic phrase—to "anomy,"[3] a direct threat to social cohesion and stability.

A second major approach sees modernity primarily as a new departure in the understanding of humanity's place in the world. For this viewpoint, changing perceptions of nature, the rise of the natural sciences and later their triumphal role in the emergence of modern technologies, and finally the increasing critique and ultimate rejection of the supernatural were all parts of a development that ushered in a "disenchanted" world, for which the economization of all aspects of human life was ultimately as characteristic as the rise of the vast bureaucracies typical of the modern state. Modernity is here aligned with the emergence of a new form of rationality (Max Weber[4]) or a novel concept of technology (Martin Heidegger[5]) aimed at dominating, controlling, or even subjugating the natural world on the basis of human volition. Once again, the ambivalence of the process thus conceived is evident. Much of the substance on which this narrative draws has been a staple of the liberal narrative of modern progress: the growth of wealth associated with the rise of the industrial economy; the unstoppable march of modern science and its victory over old and new forms of superstition; and indubitable improvements in human health and general well-being resulting from scientific and technological advances. Yet the detractors of modernity have equally pointed to human alienation from nature (Karl Marx[6]) or social captivity in the "iron cage" of a soulless world (Max Weber[7]), not to mention the social and ecological damage resulting from these developments on a planetary scale. It is not surprising that religion has played a major role in narratives of modernity that have followed this logic, as modernity is here seen as a force of secularization, characterized by an increasing tendency in modern culture to seek solutions to social and individual problems within an immanent frame, rather than



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referring to or evoking the assistance of supernatural forces. Consequently, critics of modernity have bemoaned this tendency as the marginalization of transcendence. Modernity, one might say, appears as a project that takes the oxygen away from traditional religion and has therefore often been hailed by declared enemies of religion, while spokespeople of organized religion, such as the Roman Catholic magisterium, have accused "modernism" of "immanentism," an active denial of the transcendent dimension of reality.[8] But as we shall see in more detail, the question really is more complex: views about the place of humanity within nature have in fact varied widely throughout the history of religions. Consequently Christianity, and Protestant Christianity in particular, have been seen as much more actively contributing to the emergence of modernity than the anti-Christian rhetoric of some moderns or the antimodernist pronouncements of some apologists would suggest.

The remainder of the article examines in more detail attempts to inscribe Luther and his Reformation into these complex processes. As will be seen, the two views of modernity sketched above are not always neatly separated in the thought of major theorists of modernity. This is first of all true of Hegel, for whom the rise of subjectivity was prevalent but ultimately connected with the notion of alienation from nature. An analysis of his contribution of the debate must therefore be given pride of place.

# Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

There is no doubt that Hegel (1770–1831) was the most influential philosopher to ascribe to Luther and the Reformation an important role in the emergence of modernity. It is well known that for Hegel, Luther's contribution was the religious turn to the subject. As much as Descartes introduced the subject as the foundation of metaphysics, Luther established it as the basis of all religious faith. It is therefore easy to perceive in Hegel the starting point of an unequivocal liberal affirmation of Luther's significance as the religious starting point of modernity. In reality, things are rather more complex; in fact, a closer look reveals how Hegel inaugurated a deeply ambivalent reading of both Luther and modernity.

A link between the Reformation and modernity is already evident in Hegel's early, important essay *Faith and Knowledge*.[9] Written in 1802, the text is an attempt to analyze the achievements and limitations of recent major philosophers. Hegel considers Kant, Fichte, and Jacobi in particular, arguing that they have taken to logical extremes an important strand of modern philosophy that took its starting point from RenéDescartes. This philosophical revolution, according to Hegel, has replaced traditional dogmatism with a "metaphysic of reflection"[10] by means of which traditional conceptions have been



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interiorized. What used to be metaphysical statements about the world have become in Kant's famous "Copernican Revolution" theories about the cognitive subject. Yet Hegel is clear that this intellectual development has its basis in a historical process which it seeks philosophically to justify:

> The great form of the world spirit that has come to cognizance of itself in these philosophies, is the principle of the North, and from the religious point of view, of Protestantism. This principle is subjectivity for which beauty and truth present themselves in feelings and persuasions, in love and intellect. Religion builds its temples and altars in the heart of the individual. In sighs and prayers he seeks for the God whom he denies to himself in intuition, because of the risk that the intellect will cognize what is intuited as a mere thing, reducing the sacred grove to mere timber.[11]

We can here see Hegel's alignment of modernity and Protestantism *in nuce*. Fundamental is his assumption of the unity of history; philosophical developments can fully be understood only as embedded in broader social, cultural, and indeed religious processes. To comprehend the internal logic of modern philosophy, then, is tantamount to decoding the principles underlying historical evolution during this period more generally. Unlike Karl Marx, however, in whose reconstruction intellectual movements are mere epiphenomena of economic transformations, Hegel asserts the primacy of *Geist* (mind, spirit): understanding the unity and the reality of history thus means conceiving it as the working out of the "world spirit." The simultaneous evocation by this term of the philosophy of mind (*Geist* = mind) and Christian theology (*Geist* = spirit), which cannot quite be rendered in English, invites in particular the integration of the history of religions into this grand scheme of philosophical historiography.

Within this larger scheme, for Hegel the concept that sums up developments since the 16th century is subjectivity. The turn to subjectivity is more than an emphasis on the individual or on individuality, although modernity, according to Hegel, embraces those notions as well. Subjectivity can be the signature concept of an era because it stands for one particular way human beings approach their position in the world. In the subjective key, the interior becomes the arena of all aspects of human existence: knowledge is a problem of cognition; beauty is a matter of aesthetic pleasure; morality is a quality of the will, and so forth. Subjective religion, accordingly, is religion based on faith alone; it holds in low regard, or rejects, outward ceremonies and rituals.

Alongside its emphasis on subjective, personal, and interior piety, however, this religion of modernity, Protestantism, insists on the utter remoteness of God. Only in this way, Hegel argues, can it prevent the complete identification of God with the self and thus the ultimate loss of faith. In other words, the religion of subjectivity needs to uphold the most



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radical conception of divine transcendence if it is to avoid secularization, “the reduction of the sacred grove to mere timber” in Hegel’s poetic phrase. Herein lies the specific tension, or perhaps even the paradox, of Protestantism: that by discarding the mediating power of external objects in favor of “temples and altars in the heart of the individual,” it is left with a God beyond the grasp of human reason and experience; by attempting to appropriate religion to their interior experience, the moderns gained a God more alien from their inner life than he had ever been before.

Protestantism, then, is the religion of modernity, but Hegel’s analysis is far from triumphalist. The turn to the subject that is typical of philosophers from Descartes to Kant as much as it characterizes the faith of Reformation Christianity has resulted in a deep and fundamental alienation of the subject from the world and from God. True, Hegel is no critic of modernity, inasmuch as he emphatically affirms its world-historical necessity. The theological truth acknowledged, in Hegel’s reading, by the Lutheran hymn bemoaning on Good Friday that “God himself is dead”[12] is an essential step on the path toward the full realization of the world spirit. Hegel is certainly no Romantic yearning for the lost integrity of the Catholic Middle Ages. Still, he is equally clear that the further development required of his own time lies in the reconciliation of the dualities besetting modernity. To be fully realized, the world spirit must comprise the dimension of objectivity as well as that of subjectivity.

This fundamental ambiguity is somewhat scaled back in Hegel’s later, better-known pronouncements on the significance of Luther and the Reformation. The Reformation, Hegel now argues, overcame the medieval fixation on external religious objects that had prevented believers from a full appropriation of the faith. “Justly,” he writes, “the Lutheran Reformation made the dogma [of the real presence of the body of Christ in the host] a special object of attack.”[13] The Catholic “falls down before the Host, and thus the merely outward has sanctity ascribed to it,” whereas Luther taught that “the Host had spiritual value and Christ was received only on the condition of *faith* in him.”[14] From this fundamental interiorization of religion, Hegel further argues, follow all the more visible, outward changes the Reformation brought about, such as the abolition of the division between clergy and laity or of the cult of saints.[15]

Hegel now seems more willing to grant to Lutheranism progress beyond mere subjectivity: “In the Lutheran Church the subjective feeling and the conviction of the individual is regarded as equally necessary with the objective side of Truth.” In the tradition of the Reformation, then, “Christian Freedom is actualized,”[16] even though Protestantism has a propensity to collapse this wholeness into the mere subjectivity of feeling, as Hegel bemoans in the case of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Yet his view of the historical dimension of the Reformation is unequivocal:



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> Time, since that epoch [sc. the Reformation] has had no other work to do than the formal imbuing of the world with this principle, in bringing the Reconciliation implicit [in Christianity] into objective and explicit realisation.[17]

Throughout his mature work, Hegel was explicit that modern subjectivity can only be overcome through a renewed emphasis on the community: "Objective Freedom … demand[s] the subjugation of the mere contingent Will."[18] The telos of historical evolution is the free individual embedded in a social structure that enables true interiority to coexist with a genuine connection with the world of which the person is a part. This conviction led him to affirm *Sittlichkeit*, the socially embedded ethos, over Enlightenment and Kantian *Moralität*,[19] as well as, in one of his most controversial decisions, to declare the modern nation-state the chosen destination of the world spirit.[20] This is not the place to examine these ideas in any detail, but they evidently raise questions for Hegel's ultimate judgment on the relationship between Luther and modernity, and more specifically for the role Protestant Christianity has to play in the modern world. Unlike some of his Romantic contemporaries who converted to Roman Catholicism, Hegel clearly did not think that the solution to the problems caused by the turn to subjectivity in religion was found in a return to the institutional superstructure of a global church. It is less clear, however, what he viewed as the likely or desirable outcome of the further progress of the modern world. At least three options seem possible. First, Hegel may have thought that the Lutheran/Calvinist *Landeskirche* established within the Prussian state was a long-term viable solution as much as the Prussian state was. A second possible reading would lead to the expectation that religion would become even more individualized while the institutional church increasingly receded or even merged with that of the state. Finally, the most radical interpretation would predict the demise of religion as part of a development in which human alienation from the world is more fully overcome by philosophical insight than religion could ever achieve.

All three interpretations were not only possible but actually chosen, albeit not by Hegel himself[21]: the conservative one that saw him as ultimately sanctioning the status quo in mid-century Prussia was initially the preserve of the so-called right wing of the Hegelian School but can easily be seen behind the later turn to nationalist historiography and its view of Luther as the founding father of the German nation. The second interpretation became foundational for theological liberalism, with its twin convictions of Protestantism as the religion of modernity *and* individuality, while the third one led to the critique of the Hegelian left and in some ways to Marx's historical materialism. This is important in order to perceive Hegel's significance for subsequent intellectual developments. To be sure, his interest was neither in "modernization" nor in "secularization" in the sense these terms assumed in 20th-century debates, but while he himself was neither technically a historian nor a political or social scientist and not even really a theologian,



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his ideas about the ambivalent character of modernity and the particular contribution Luther and the Reformation made to its emergence became foundational for many or most theorists following in his wake.[22]

# Albrecht Ritschl

In the last decades of the 19th century and especially after the founding of the German Reich in 1871, a triumphalist interpretation of Luther as the champion of modern freedom and the originator of the German nation became predominant.[23] All the more important were the voices begging to differ from this one-sided consensus. Historical critics queried the notion of a direct line of descent stretching from Luther to 19th-century modernity. Wilhelm Dilthey argued in some detail that Renaissance humanism had an equal or better claim to stand at the origins of the modern world.[24] Friedrich Nietzsche, with characteristic bluntness, opined that had Luther been burnt on the stake like Jan Hus, "the Enlightenment would perhaps have dawned somewhat earlier and with a more beautiful luster than we can now conceive."[25]

Against this line of argument, Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) was the first to develop a strategy that afterward became enormously popular among Lutheran apologists of various stripes. He suggested for the first time that one should differentiate between Luther himself and subsequent Lutheranism, which in both its scholastic and its pietistic-mystical forms, according to him, owed more to the Catholic Middle Ages than to the revolutionary insights of the Reformer himself. Right at the outset of the third, systematic volume of his major work *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, Ritschl identified a return to "the model of the Scholastics" and to Aristotle, already evident in the later editions of Philipp Melanchthon's *Loci Theologici*.[26] This approach allowed Ritschl to snatch Luther from those conservative Lutheran contemporaries who claimed his authority for a full affirmation of their doctrinal version of the faith. It also, more importantly for the present discussion, facilitated a perception of Luther as the originator of modernity, along with the acceptance that German Lutheranism from the late 16th century until the early 18th was clearly not a major driver of modernization.

Even more significant was Ritschl's reinterpretation of the theological as well as historical importance of Luther's theology and of the Reformation more generally. For Ritschl was a sworn foe of the liberal affirmation of religious individualism, and he rejected *tout court* their view that Luther should be celebrated as a champion of religious subjectivity. Instead, he saw as the fundamental theological insight of the Reformer the acknowledgment of the practical character of the Christian faith. Religious practice,



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however, was ineluctably embedded in a community, which in the case of Christianity was the kingdom of God, whose arrival Jesus identified with his own coming. Knowledge of God was therefore possible only, Ritschl argued, "from the standpoint of the Christian community," and this was what he took Luther's Christocentrism to mean.[27] Consequently, theology had to engage with the social character of religion and with society more generally, but Protestantism had by and large neglected this task in favor of a one-sided exploration of the interior life of the believer.

Ritschl saw his own theology as an attempt to rectify this shortcoming. The most influential social doctrine in the history of Christianity was Augustine's theory which identified the kingdom of God with the church. Yet this view, according to Ritschl, set up the church as a competitor of the state, with disastrous consequences for both. The reformers, by contrast, took the opposite view: they identified the church as the community of believers and recognized "the State as a directly Divine institution" and "civil justice as a positive moral good."[28] They did not, however, develop an alternative theological account of Christian sociality and therefore disagreed sharply among themselves in their assessment of the relationship between church and state.[29] Yet the Protestant answer, according to Ritschl, was ultimately clear: Christian religious practice was civic and "bourgeois" existence in a different key. Believers were not called away from the world, but faith provided them with the spiritual means to persevere within their worldly vocation. By pursuing their existence as family members, professionals, and citizens, Christians would find fulfillment given their conviction that such a life was willed by God, and their success in the face of adversity was part of God's promise to his people.[30]

All theological statements, Ritschl urged, must be understood to refer not merely to the relationship between God and humanity but, in a triangular fashion, to include reference to the world as well. Any formation of Christianity, consequently, gives rise not merely to a particular doctrine of God and a certain anthropology, but also to a worldview. Luther's Christianity aligns the believer and God as jointly part of the kingdom, albeit in different ways. By contrast, the natural world is, according to Ritschl, merely a means to an end; in fact, Christians are explicitly promised mastery over nature as part of their existence in the Spirit.[31]

It is thus evident that Ritschl, while rejecting the view of Luther as the forerunner of modernity *qua* "subjective" religion, has his own distinctive view of the relationship between Luther and modernity. Key for this theory is his identification of Luther's insight with a turn to this-worldly practice. Christians who follow their Redeemer do not withdraw from the world to be closer to a transcendent deity, but instead affirm their religious vocation in and through their professional and civic duties. Given that the spiritual sustenance provided by their faith is the assurance that their work overcomes



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the resistance and hostility of material nature, the relegation of the latter to a "disenchanted" object of human agency is the necessary byproduct of Ritschl's Christianity.

His emphasis on the practical character of Christianity has earned Ritschl the reputation of being a theological disciple of Immanuel Kant,[32] but while Ritschl made no secret of his appreciation of Kant's contribution to the history of theology, one can easily see him as offering an alternative solution to Hegel's dilemma regarding Protestantism and modernity as well. By denying the premise that Luther inaugurated an irredeemably subjective form of Christianity, Ritschl facilitated a view that saw as characteristic of modernity the emergence of new forms of religious socialization rather than their demise. At the same time, his (theological) analysis of Protestant Christianity is a fascinating variation on Hegel's own account. While rejecting Hegel's emphasis on subjectivity, Ritschl's instrumentalist interpretation of Protestantism's view of the world tallies with Hegel's observation of the desacralizing and even secularizing tendency of post-Reformation Christianity.

It must be reiterated at this point that Ritschl had no intention of offering a theory of modernity, let alone inscribing Luther into such a narrative. The idea of Protestantism as a religion of communal practice, as it emerges from his work, underwrites a systematic theology and is thus meant to say what Protestant Christianity ought to be, not what it has historically been. Yet the historicist cast of his work meant that, in practice, the line between historical description and normative argument was never clear-cut; instead, theological conclusions would usually emerge from a historical narrative. In this way, Ritschl's theology produced, almost by coincidence, one of the most influential interpretations of the connection between Luther and modernity, even though it was only in its ingenious adaptation by Max Weber that this view came fully into its own.[33]

# Ernst Troeltsch

Ritschl, as has been seen, responded to the tendency of theological liberalism to draw a triumphalist line from Luther's subjective religion to the individualism of modern Protestantism by rejecting the legitimacy of religious individualism. Ernst Troeltsch (1856–1923) dealt with the same problem in a very different way: he gave up on the notion that Luther was the "father" of modern Protestantism and thus, by implication, of modernity. This was due in large measure to his recognition that it was impossible to draw a direct line from Luther to the liberal Protestantism of his own time. Troeltsch's position has often been simplified into the claim that Luther was a man of the Middle



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Ages, not of modernity. In reality his theory was subtler, though it did offer a rather sharp rebuke to those who sought to link Luther directly with modernity.

First of all, it is noticeable that compared to both Hegel and Ritschl, Troeltsch worked with a much more specific definition of modernity or—as he preferred to say—"the modern world." He is clear that it denotes a complex system of radical scientific innovations and their technological application, of fundamental philosophical transformations, and of the emergence of the capitalist economy driving the development of enormously powerful nation-states.[34] The question of how this novel cultural formation arose became, for Troeltsch, something of a scientific problem which could only be solved by highly technical, comparative historiographical analysis. Consequently, his utterances on the topic abound with expressions of skeptical caution emphasizing time and again the complexity of the matter he is dealing with and the impossibility of clear-cut answers.

For all his academic vagueness, however, there is one point on which Troeltsch is reasonably clear: the modern world for him is a product of the 18th century, not the 16th.[35] The question therefore arises how to understand the preceding centuries. Troeltsch identifies this time, the 15th to 17th centuries and thus roughly what historians today refer to as early modernity, as a period of transition. Three movements are particularly characteristic of this era: Reformation, Renaissance and humanism, and the emergence of the nation-state.[36] As part of this period, therefore, Troeltsch argues, Protestantism must be understood as a phenomenon of transition whose "entire, inner being is explained from its middle position containing the old and the new in a unique blend."[37] In other words, and in stark and provocative contrast to the liberal tradition harking back to Hegel, Troeltsch suggests that Protestantism in its original form can be understood only by paying attention to its continuity with the Middle Ages as much as to the seeds of the modern world that it may contain as well.

Modernity, by contrast, arose from the insights of thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Troeltsch does not deny that ideas dating back to the Reformation were influential in the philosophies developed by those thinkers, but he urges that these figures cannot be reduced to agents of Protestantism, given that various other impulses from the transitional period were equally influential on them. Protestantism therefore, at least in its "old" version as it emerged in the 16th century, was Janus-faced: "looking backwards it presents itself in major ways as a continuation and even renewal of the medieval spirit," even though it is also true that "looking forward" it prepared the way for later modern developments.[38]

Troeltsch felt the Reformation was in continuity with the Middle Ages in three ways. First, its idea of the church continued to be that of "an objective institution founded and supported throughout by the God-man and being categorically juxtaposed to the world



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lost in original sin."[39] Second, while one can say that the Lutheran Reformation "secularized" religious ethics by abandoning the ideal of the monastic life, it did so by sacralizing the secular.[40] Importantly, Troeltsch suggests, the underlying ethical ideas in their peculiar blend of biblical views with the pre-Christian natural law tradition were largely shared by the Reformers and their opponents. Third, even in the realm of doctrine, the main arena in which the conflict between Catholics and early Protestants was fought, things were less clear-cut than they seemed; Protestants were largely content to "solve medieval problems in new ways."[41] The doctrine of justification in particular, Troeltsch claims, took not merely its name "but the formulation of the problem … from the Middle Ages."[42] Small wonder therefore that the same philosophy, developed by Spanish Neo-scholasticism, underwrote the theological argument on both sides of the controversy.

In important ways, then, the Reformation must be understood as part of medieval Christianity. Troeltsch is not, of course, blind to the ways in which Luther broke radically with medieval conventions and prepared the ground for later, modern developments. He singles out four areas in which this was the case.[43] First, Luther's emphasis on faith over against medieval sacramentalism turned religion into a much more personal and spiritual matter. Second, by reducing to a minimum the mediating role of the church in acquiring salvation, the Reformation took the route to religious individualism in which each person's fate depends directly on his or her individual relationship with God. Third, the practical side of this turn to personal faith is the emergence of a morality of conscience, a more radical version of an interiorized ethics. Fourth and finally, the religious practice required by Protestant Christianity is carried out in and through ordinary life. Following the Reformation critique of "good works in asceticism," religious practice is no longer perfected by "supernatural acts" but by "the simple execution of the natural circle of activities with the mere miracle of a conviction that trusts in God and unites the believer with him."[44]

In those four moments of Reformation thought, which Troeltsch accepts as proto-modern, one can easily recognize ideas that had been prevalent among earlier theorists like Hegel and Ritschl. Troeltsch, in other words, is not original in his identification of the specific impulses emerging in and from the Reformation. His contribution is to problematize their exact historical relationship with the principles making up the modern world. Even where Luther and the other Reformers anticipate modern ideas, those ideas do not come into effect until much later and under the influence of factors that were altogether unintended by the Reformers themselves. Troeltsch mentions in particular historical criticism of the Bible, the political (and theological) notion of religious toleration, and modern philosophy; these forces in conjunction with a raft of other modernizing trends during the



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18th century brought about a situation in which the modernizing dimension of Reformation theology came into its own.[45]

Yet this development happened in the teeth of fierce resistance from the guardians of the "old" Protestant churches. The modern, liberal Protestantism that was so proudly held up by progressives in Germany and elsewhere throughout the 19th century cannot, therefore, be seen as the direct heir of the Reformation. It is a New Protestantism, quite different from the Old Protestantism that existed in the *Übergangszeit* and possible only after the older version had succumbed to the forces of modernization at the turn of the 19th century. Does that mean that "New Protestants" have no right to claim Luther's inheritance for their own religion? Troeltsch does not go quite so far. He recognizes that Luther stands in a way aloof from the ambivalences of the Old Protestantism because of the uniqueness of his own religious experience.[46] Luther was a "conservative revolutionary,"[47] whose paradoxical understanding of God, best expressed in his *Bondage of the Will*, was never coterminous with the teaching of any confessional church but, by the same token, continued as a crucial resource even after the historical context of his activity had become alien for modern believers.[48]

It is hard to overstate the importance of Troeltsch's intervention on the relationship of Luther and modernity. His own commitment to liberal Protestantism made uniquely persuasive his willingness to recognize the immense historical difficulties in constructing the 16th-century Reformer as the direct ancestor of modern Protestantism. It can certainly be argued that it was Troeltsch's skepticism more than the outright hostility of Burckhardt or Nietzsche that put paid to the triumphalist alignment of Luther with modern Protestantism. A whole scholarly paradigm researching the integration of Luther into late medieval thought was, directly or indirectly, the result of his critical reassessment of Luther's place in cultural history. But Troeltsch was influential also on those who disagreed with him. In many ways, the scholarship of Karl Holl and the Luther Renaissance was a conscious effort to reestablish the modernity of Luther's insights in the teeth of Troeltsch's criticism.

In other ways, however, one can also argue that Troeltsch's voice of skeptical moderation remained largely unheeded. The appeal of a simplistic connection of Luther's thought with the goods and ills of modernity has clearly been too generally attractive to be exchanged for the less spectacular, measured skepticism of the historicist theologian. Sweeping attempts to integrate Luther into grand narratives and genealogies of modernity have consequently remained *de rigueur* throughout the 20th century and have, if anything, intensified at the turn of the 21st century.



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# Max Weber

Max Weber (1846–1920) remains without a doubt the most influential theorist of modernity, and while his celebrated essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is largely focused on the Calvinist free churches in Holland, England, and the North American colonies, his contribution to the larger story of the connection between the Reformation and modernity is too important to be ignored in the present context. In particular, it will become evident how closely his own perspective is interwoven with the line of thought that flows from Hegel via Ritschl to Ernst Troeltsch; but it will equally appear that Weber's research takes an entirely new direction.

Weber's starting point in determining the origin of modern capitalism is an observation about a terminological innovation in the German language that seems to have originated in Luther's translation of the Bible. The word *Beruf* ("vocation"), which used to refer specifically to the calling into the spiritual life, was increasingly applied to the much wider field of human professional activity—so much so that by his own time, the most quotidian use of the term had come to denote a person's profession.[49] From this point about linguistic development, Weber deduced a deeper cultural and social shift: the notion of religious and moral excellence that in the Catholic Middle Ages was conferred on those who chose the spiritual life had in Protestantism been transferred to people's secular, industrious occupation. To live a life maximally pleasing to God, it was now no longer necessary to enter a monastery, but instead to conduct well—and that meant successfully—one's chosen professional career.[50]

This shift coincided, according to Weber, with a second development: the utter reduction or complete abandonment of the importance that was accorded in the pre-Reformation Catholic system to the hierarchical church, represented to the individual believer through priests who apportioned to them by means of the sacraments the supernatural grace of salvation, and increased manifold the anxiety conscientious Christians would feel about their personal, spiritual state. The early modern Protestant, Weber suggested, was alone in a world governed by a remote and transcendent God who mysteriously chose whom to save and whom to condemn.[51] Thus they lived in "inner isolation"; "no one could help them."[52]

In this situation, the question of the individual's certitude of redemption, Weber conjectured, required a new answer, and this answer was given with reference to the novel ethical valuation of the secular profession. Professional achievement thus became indicative of one's state of grace, but—by virtue of a psychologically plausible exchange of cause and effect—Protestants engineered their economic success in order to feel



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reassured about their salvation, even though they knew that the latter depended on a free act of God that could not be swayed by human actions.[53] More than any of his predecessors, Weber was thus willing to put the Reformation's unintended consequences at the heart of his theory.[54] He consciously did not work as a theologian but operated in a secular environment in which religious forces ultimately counted as social forces too. While for Weber's friend Troeltsch the lack of intentional modernity in the Reformers' thought was still a problem, the founding father of sociology had no such qualms. In order to explain the emergence of modernity as a unique formation of human culture, Weber used theological and religious factors, but his methodology always transformed them into a blueprint for social and economic change.

In spite of Weber's preference for the generic term "Protestant," it is evident—and well known—that he considered Calvinism the true religion of modernity. There is partly a personal reason for this preference: if there is any animus detectable in Weber's work, it is against the North German form of Lutheranism in which he grew up. Weber regularly expressed his contempt for this religion, with its paternalism and its inability to develop an ethics suitable for the impersonal character of capitalist society.[55] He also was, even more than Troeltsch, swayed by the argument that Luther, with a "peasant's mistrust of capital,"[56] represented a step back into the Middle Ages rather than the origin of modernity, even though there is the occasional nod toward Luther, the "religious genius."[57]

At the same time, and arguably more importantly, the radicalism with which Calvinism dispensed with the traditional sacramental trappings of religion fit excellently Weber's own grand narrative of rationalization as a historical process that brings about both the triumph of reason but also the ultimately meaningless functionality associated with the word "rationalization."[58] At the height of Western civilization, as Weber saw it, the critique of magic and superstition in the name of reason created an "iron cage" of technocratic and bureaucratic rationality that forces an entirely new approach to human life on the moderns.[59] To the extent that Protestantism had a crucial role to play in this development, it had to be the predestinarian, iconoclastic, socially revolutionary Puritan Calvinism, not the semi-Catholic, conservative Lutheranism that had established itself in Germany and had, if anything, delayed its progress toward modernity.

For the author of *The Protestant Ethic*, then, the significance of Luther for the emergence of the modern world was limited. Luther and the Lutheran church appear as halfway houses between medieval Catholicism and the modernizing forces of Puritan Calvinism. Even the latter's contribution, however, had become a mere historical fact for Weber. The significance of Puritanism for him consisted in the close resemblance between its version of Christianity and the secular, post-religious ideology underwriting human existence in



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Weber's own fully rationalized world. While this detached attitude sets him apart from Hegel and Ritschl, and also from Troeltsch, his perception of the Reformation and modernity still owes much to this earlier intellectual history. In particular, it is evident how strong the current of Ritschl's thinking influenced the argument of *The Protestant Ethic*, a fact that is borne out by the quantity of Weber's references—Ritschl is the single most cited author in the famous essay—if not by the interest shown by the majority of Weberian scholars in this connection.[60] In Ritschl, Weber encountered the idea of professional "vocation" as central for Protestant religiosity, but arguably also the notion of "disenchantment" as characteristic of the Protestant worldview.

The close proximity between Weber and Troeltsch, however, is well known and evidenced not least by their close personal friendship and collaboration. It is therefore almost more important to emphasize how different their views were with regard to the relationship between Luther and modernity. Troeltsch's aim was an account of modern Protestantism that could be a viable religious option in his own time, and his critique of Luther's direct ancestry to liberal Protestantism was in aid of that practical goal. Weber, however, denied the legitimacy of such a search; consequently, he was much less interested than his friend in the theological potential of 18th-century "Neo-Protestantism," choosing instead to focus on the Puritanism of the 17th century as the truly transitional phenomenon.[61]

Finally, while a major gap seems to divide Weber's perception of a hostile, technocratic, and disenchanted modernity from Hegel's vision of the world spirit coming into its own in a world increasingly dominated by the idea of freedom, parallels between the two are certainly not absent. After all, Hegel's watchword was rationalization too, and while Weber—under Nietzsche's influence—emphasized more strongly the ambivalence of Western rationality, Hegel's own theory, as has been seen, was certainly not without its own ambivalence. More specifically, Hegel's idea of modernity included the notion of human alienation from a "disenchanted" world, and he himself had connected this aspect specifically with the religious spirit of Protestantism. It is ultimately this ambivalence with regard to the radical nature of Protestantism as a form of Christianity that forgoes the props of external mediation in the interest of the purity of an interiorized faith that links Hegel and Weber, who both, in different ways, felt challenged to connect this faith with the emergence of an equally ambivalent modernity.

# Catholic Critics

It would be wrong to see the tradition of connecting Luther with the rise of modernity as a purely Protestant undertaking. From the time of the Catholic Restoration, it was a



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staple of the Catholic critique of modernity to delegitimize it by linking it with the inheritance of the arch-heretic.

## Joseph de Maistre

For Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), it went without saying that the nihilism (*rienisme*[62]) of the Reformation and of Protestantism was one of the chief sources of the French Revolution. While Catholicism depended on the notion on authority, on "the infallibility of teaching from which results blind respect for authority, the abnegation of any individual reasoning and, consequently, the universality of belief,"[63] Protestantism was its exact opposite, the sworn enemy of order and consensus. Protestants could not agree on anything except to oppose anything and everything; their license for free examination of all authoritative claims ultimately resulted in the destruction of all certainty and authority, religious as well as political.[64] It was therefore politically expedient as well as religiously justified to persecute Protestants: "Louis XIV trampled Protestantism, and he died in his bed shining with glory and laden with years. Louis XVI caressed it, and he died on the scaffold."[65]

While the link between Reformation and revolution as constructed by de Maistre would certainly have seemed counterintuitive to any German Lutheran familiar with the Lutheran affirmation of the alliance of throne and altar, it would be wrong to overlook similarities between his view and the perception of Hegel and his successors. Ultimately, de Maistre saw Protestantism as dangerous because of its emphasis on individuality and subjectivity. His sharp repudiation of Protestantism as nihilistic was largely due to an alignment of religion with social and political stability. A "religion of subjectivity" was therefore a contradiction in itself, the very antithesis of religion and, for that reason, a threat to human society.

De Maistre's take on Luther's impact on the emergence of modernity, linking an emphasis on subjectivity with ecclesial and political insubordination, was replicated by the teaching magisterium throughout the 19th century. In his encyclical *Mirari vos*, Pope Gregory XVI linked Luther with those who denied "the trust and submission due to princes" on the basis of his intention to be "free of all."[66] In 1849, Pius IX equally drew a straight line from the Reformation's questioning of ecclesial authority to civic disobedience as displayed by socialists and communists.[67] And Pius X evoked Luther in his condemnation of the modernists as a forerunner of the principle "that science in no wise depends on faith."[68]



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## Jacques Maritain

A much more nuanced yet ultimately equally devastating assessment of Luther's relationship with modernity was put forward by Jacques Maritain (1882–1973). Maritain, who was born into a liberal Protestant family but later converted to Catholicism, developed his view in his book *Trois réformateurs*; the title is already indicative of his approach.[69] Luther is here discussed alongside René Descartes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, according to Maritain, together "reformed" Western civilization and are therefore jointly seen as originators of modernity.

What sets them apart as a group is their unique contribution to what Maritain calls the "modern conscience": while Descartes "reformed" philosophy and Rousseau morality, Luther—evidently the earliest of the three—was *un réformateur religieux*.[70] The grand narrative into which they are all inscribed is that of a subjective turn in world history, the creation of the modern ego and with it the arrival of both individualism and immanentism. All three reformers have, in different ways, paved the way for a world that subscribes to the autonomy of the subject at the cost of the human relationship with God; their emphasis on subjectivity was paid for by the loss of the transcendent.

Maritain thus resumes, albeit implicitly, the Hegelian narrative with its dual focus on Luther and Descartes as twin originators of a worldview based on subjective experience. In fact, the list of problems resulting from this decision in Maritain is not so far removed from what Hegel had perceived a century earlier. In particular, the connection of the triumph of subjectivity with the emergence of the immanent and enclosed self, the rise of alienation and ultimately secularization, are strikingly similar in both thinkers, even though Maritain's critical conclusions are much more unequivocally negative than Hegel's ambivalence about modernity as well as Protestantism.

There is, however, little evidence that Maritain drew on Hegel in coming to his own conclusions. He apparently relied heavily on contemporary Catholic Luther scholars, especially Heinrich Denifle and Hartmann Grisar, in his attempt to grasp the core of the Reformer's personality, which he believed was ultimately key for an understanding of his historical role. Quite intentionally, Maritain took a psychological approach in his search for the religious origins of the anthropological turn in Western history. Following Denifle, Maritain described Luther as a man of limited rationality but with an overly developed sensuality, who therefore had a tendency to dwell excessively on his own interior emotions and desires. This tendency caused his famous internal struggles, which ultimately, rather than resulting in reconciliation with God, replaced any interest in God with interest in the human subject. Overly reliant, on the other hand, on his own abilities, Luther fled from the despair of his spiritual temptations into worldly activity, giving up



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his religious struggle in the face of seemingly irresistible concupiscence. Luther's affirmation of faith alone, according to Maritain, is merely the theological translation of his existential experience. But while this development made "head of school, master, and prophet," his denial of the human participation "in the justification of Jesus Christ and his grace" resulted in the immanent enclosure of the self.[71] Luther, according to Maritain, may well claim to owe everything to grace: by denying "that a human work can be equally the work of God, he practically posited an unbridled naturalism" which led straight to the vacuity of modern immanentism.[72]

While Maritain's diagnosis of Luther's metaphysics of subjectivity and the ensuing alienation of the interior sphere from the world reiterates ideas familiar from Hegel, Weber, and others, he introduces other charges more directly connected with the tradition of the Catholic Restoration. Thus he speaks of "the Lutheran revolution," intimating that Luther was the ultimate originator of the French Revolution. Finally, Maritain advanced the characteristically Thomist charge that Luther's voluntarism was the source of modernity's rejection of proper rationality. Luther for Maritain was an "enemy of philosophy" who "declared war on reason in general."[73]

Summing up his judgment, Maritain concludes that Luther, while certainly not a modern man, stands at the origin of the modern world. By putting the self at the center of his universe and by declaring it sovereign, he displays *in nuce* the basis of all the errors of modernity.[74]

# Developments since World War II

In the decades after World War II, references to Luther and the Reformation in the context of debates about the origin of modernity did not disappear but became less frequent. Characteristic is Hans Blumenberg's influential apology for modernity, published as *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.[75] For Blumenberg, modernity represents a rightful act of intellectual self-defense against the theological totalitarianism of the late Middle Ages. By this he means the emergence of nominalism with its doctrine of an omnipotent and arbitrary God, resulting in unbearable intellectual and existential terror for late medieval people. Whatever the merits of this theory, it is noticeable that Luther and the Reformation occupy a mere niche in this narrative. Luther is *one of* the nominalists and thus part of the problem. He is certainly not part of the solution, but more significantly he is not a major agent on either side of the conflict.[76]

This tendency to see the major fault line in intellectual history in the high Middle Ages, with the rise of nominalism in the 13th-century philosophy of Duns Scotus or, more



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generally, in Franciscan thought, has in many ways taken over as a major narrative of the emergence of modernity.[77] Another competitor to the pivotal place of Luther and the Reformation in the formation of modern Europe has been the confessionalization thesis, put forward by secular historians for whom the Reformation is only one aspect in a bigger transformation from the relative pluralism of late medieval Europe into the much more homogeneous blocs of nation-states in early modern Europe. Lutheranism, Calvinism, and early modern Catholicism become quasi-siblings in this perception of the making of modernity, as each in its own way is a product of the 16th century and of major significance for subsequent developments.[78]

Part of this shift is no doubt a result of changes in Western religious identities during this period. The waning of the confessional matrix, the rise of ecumenism, and the opening of the Catholic Church to modernity at the Second Vatican Council have all played their part. Charles Taylor, unlike Jacques Maritain two generations earlier, has no difficulty in acknowledging the positive contribution of Luther and the Reformation for the "affirmation of ordinary life" as one of the predominant aspects of the modern self.[79] At the same time, his narrative is free from the fixation on the 16th century so typical of 19th- and early 20th-century thinkers; modernity in Taylor's liberal Catholic perspective is the result of the confluence of many tributaries going back to Plato and Augustine.

At the turn of the 21st century, however, there are signs that another shift may be under way. Faced with a largely secularized public for whom it seems natural to align the march of liberal modernity with the forces of secularization, authors find it necessary to insist on "the theological origins of modernity."[80] The coincidence of modernizing developments with dramatic shifts in the religious makeup of Latin American and Asian countries prompts social scientists to speculate about the opportunity to find empirical confirmation of Weber's views connecting Protestantism and capitalist modernity.[81] Finally, a renewed Catholic critique of secular modernity is again making attractive a narrative aligning the Reformation with the origins of modern secularity.[82]

# Review of the Literature

Literature on the problem of the relationship between Luther and modernity has become extensive and unwieldy, partly because academic debate has been conducted in a broad field of disciplines including theology, philosophy, and history, as well as social and political theory. Additionally, the significance of the figures who fed the original discussion means that there are substantial subthreads devoted to thinkers such as Hegel



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or Weber, whose contribution to the problem is naturally examined in conjunction with their overall theoretical systems.

An assessment of the current state of historical scholarship on Reformation and modernity can be found in C. Scott Dixon's *Contesting the Reformation*.[83] Dixon traces the narrative mostly back to Weber and covers three main areas: the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, the emergence of individualism, and the problem of "disenchantment." His recognition that these questions are still a legitimate topic of debate contrasts with the rather dismissive attitude of historians of the previous generation who often sought to reduce them to the ideology of modern Protestantism,[84] and is mirrored by the work of current historians such as Brad Gregory who insist on re-emphasizing the lasting significance of the Reformation for all aspects of contemporary life—clearly at the risk of bringing back the "meta-historical" Luther[85] Brady and others worked to avoid.

For a critical attempt theologically to restate the significance of Luther for modernity, Gerhard Ebeling's essay of 1972 is still valuable.[86] Under the title "Luther and the Beginning of the Modern Age," Ebeling traces his narrative from Hegel to Troeltsch to argue that an unhelpful historical juxtaposition of pre-modernity and modernity has so far prevented an appropriate understanding of Luther's lasting theological significance. Ebeling's Luther thus retains his importance for the late 20th century by combining ideas that are compatible with modernity with insights that are critical of it. This is, in principle, also the view of Louis Dupré, who, in his important study *Passage to Modernity*, argues that Luther's theology represents one of the first attempts to overcome the typically modern dualism of nature and grace.[87] In stark contrast, John Milbank aligns Luther with nominalism and thus with the dualistic break away from traditional Christianity that in his view is typical of modernity.[88] Finally, Wolfhart Pannenberg, who ascribes to Christianity a foundational role for the emergence of modernity,[89] largely reduces Luther's specific importance to his theological critique of ecclesiastical abuses and errors of his time.[90]

In philosophy, the importance of Luther for modernity is not a prominent topic; assessments have occurred largely in the context of Hegel studies. Broadly Hegelian theorists of modernity, such as Merold Westphal[91] and Charles Taylor,[92] take note of the importance of his interpretation of the Reformation, but without much independent concern for the latter. A much more central place is given to Luther in Reiner Schürmann's posthumously published *Broken Hegemonies*: Luther as a philosopher is Kant's forerunner as the originator of modern transcendentalism.[93]

Literature in the political and social sciences dealing with the "Weberian thesis" is boundless. A critical review is offered by Hans Joas, according to whom the various forms



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this thesis has assumed are essentially part of a "Protestant metanarrative."[94] An overview of the various academic and ideological criticisms directed against Weber's interpretation of the relationship of Protestantism and modernity is offered by Anthony Giddens in his introduction to the reprint of Parsons's translation of *The Protestant Ethic*.[95] For a thorough historical contextualization and assessment of Weber's research on Protestantism and modernity, on the other hand, Peter Ghosh's *Max Weber and the "Protestant Ethic": Twin Histories* provides essential reading.[96]

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## Notes:

(1.) Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), 166n11.

(2.) Olaf Blaschke, “Das 19. Jahrhundert: Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter?” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26 (2000): 38–75.

(3.) Émile Durkheim, *De la division du travail social* (7th ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires du France, 2007), 360–361.

(4.) Max Weber, “Author’s Introduction,” in *Protestant Ethic*, ed. Weber, xxviii–xxxix.

(5.) Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. Martin Heidegger and trans. W. Lovitt (New York and London: Garland, 1977), 3–35.

(6.) Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’: Introduction,” in *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, ed. Karl marx and trans. A. Jolin and J. O’Malley (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 129–142.

(7.) Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 123.

(8.) Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hünermann, and Helmut Hoping, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (43rd ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 2010), No. 3477 ff.; 3878.



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(9.) G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. W. Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977).

(10.) Ibid., 189.

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