

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09736-0 - Hegel Versus 'Inter-Faith Dialogue': A General Theory of True Xenophilia

Andrew Shanks

Excerpt

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Introduction: The Basic Opposition between Faith and 'Faiths'

'Everything I write about theology is more or less "Hegelian". This one's about the application of Hegelian principle to the whole question of – you know – how Christians ought to relate to the followers of other religious traditions, in a modern multicultural society.'

'So, you mean Hegel and inter-faith dialogue. . .?'

'Ah, no! No!' (Imagine: klaxons blaring.) 'Not "inter-faith dialogue"! In a way, that's the whole point: *getting beyond the wretched notion of "inter-faith"*.'

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I object to the term 'inter-faith dialogue' because of what it does to the theological concept of 'faith'.

Thus, suppose we understand faith, purely and simply, as an inflection of the will to perfect *truth-as-openness*. It is of course always surrounded by, and liable to be confused with, associated claims to theoretic *truth-as-correctness*. Christian theology, at its best, is an intertwining of both. But suppose we accord fundamental *priority*, here, to truth-as-openness over truth-as-correctness. This is the basic 'Hegelian' theological move. Truth-as-correctness: a quality of verbal accuracy, logical consistency, proper intellectual technique. Truth-as-openness: a quality of selfless love; Christ-likeness, 'the way, the truth and the life'. With regard to our encounter with religious diversity, perfect truth-as-openness must surely mean the most radical *xenophilia*: an *a priori* love of the unfamiliar as such. That is to say, openness towards the unmastered and un-masterable; to the freshly thought-provoking; to the strange; to the stranger: as Christ is forever, to us, the Stranger. This, in Hegelian terms, is the essential dynamic of truth-bearing *Geist*.

In the end, I think that 'inter-faith' is an intrinsically xenophilia-restrictive term, forever tending to divert true *theo*-logical consideration

of religious diversity away from xenophilia into a merely *ideo*-logical negotiation process, between those representing rival claims to metaphysical truth-as-correctness.

Theology, after all, is definable (in the old Anselmian phrase) as 'faith seeking understanding'. 'Faith' is, by definition, its highest value; that in which it finds 'salvation', nothing less. It is the science of 'faith'. However, the phrase 'inter-faith dialogue' surely suggests a notion of 'faith' framed as a mere matter of tick-box, checklist ideological identity; that is, an identity simply equivalent to one's answering 'yes' to a certain set of questions about what one believes, or externally participating in a particular set of rituals. For what else does the phrase imply, if not a negotiation process between neighbouring religious communities understood in just those terms? Thus, on each side of the 'dialogue', in this picture, one has the community of all those who would answer 'yes' to a certain checklist of key questions regarding religious 'belief' and practice. Regardless of the actual complexities of the encounter, it *sounds like* a matter of those who would answer 'yes' to one such list entering into some sort of negotiation with those who would answer 'yes' to another; the licensed representatives of one such camp negotiating with the licensed representatives of another. To be sure, this negotiation may well be framed within a provisional, friendly agreement-to-disagree about the rival claims to ultimate sacred truth-as-correctness enshrined in each tradition. And yet, the concept of 'inter-faith dialogue' still conjures up the idea of a negotiation between two or more camps fundamentally *divided* by their different forms of 'faith', understood that way. 'Faith' here appears to signify the original source of the problematic division – one bloc, one 'faith', set over against another – which the 'dialogue' – that is, the 'inter'-face between them – now has to resolve.

But, against this way of speaking, I want to protest: *as a Christian theologian, that simply is not what I mean by 'faith' at all!* True faith, as I understand it, only ever serves to open minds. It does not close them; does not create a problem of divisive closure, requiring dialogue by way of management, or therapy. What does that is not true faith. It just is not the stuff of salvation. For salvation is already, itself, absolutely an opening of the mind.

True faith, in the sense I am proposing, is something infinitely more demanding, and therefore less obvious, than a mere tick-box, checklist claim to truth-as-correctness, as regards metaphysical belief or consequent devout practice. Nor is the difference here merely a quantitative one, in the sense that 'faith' in the tick-box, checklist sense might become valid at a certain level of sheer passionate sincerity, once it had reached boiling point,

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as it were. No, it really is a fundamental qualitative difference. True faith bursts the conceptual bounds of 'inter-faith dialogue', as such, by virtue of its sheer intrinsic generosity. Of course, the actual *practice* of what is designated 'inter-faith dialogue' may well be informed with the very utmost xenophilia. My own experience suggests that this is indeed often the case. But the trouble is that the *concept* obscures this.

The better to flag up the basic distinction between the two senses of 'faith' here, from now on I propose to write true 'Faith' with a capital 'F'. Faith with a capital 'F' is *essentially* a relationship with God made manifest in and through a certain quality of sympathetic moral open-mindedness towards one's neighbours. It is, indeed, precisely that attitude of mind which invests the most demanding openness towards others (including those who belong to other religious traditions) with an absolute maximum of sacred authority. Not only, therefore, do we have to allow the potential presence of Faith, so defined, in 'anonymous' forms, altogether set apart from the tick-box, checklist processes involved in its being rendered conventionally explicit within the Church or other religious bodies; further, I think we should acknowledge that, from a proper Christian-theological point of view, it may very often be *more* valid, precisely as a revelation of our God, when anonymous than when explicit. Anonymous Faith is not, as such, automatically second-class Faith! In view of the historic corruption of church tradition, there may even sometimes be positive theological *advantages* in anonymity, where none of the 'correct' boxes are in fact religiously ticked. For, insofar as 'correct' church tradition becomes a mere betrayal, in actual practice, of the gospel, the 'incorrect' anonymity of anonymous Faith may well serve as a shelter from the resultant profanation.

Talk of 'inter-faith dialogue' suggests a notion of 'faiths' in the plural. 'Faiths' defined by tick-box, checklist criteria may well be counted, as in the bureaucratic process of producing a census. But by what criteria would one divide true Faith, as such, and for what purpose? It is indivisible. New Testament Greek had no word for 'faiths'. It is a notion still absent from a great many modern languages, and is a somewhat recent innovation in English. But in contemporary English it has of course become quite normal to speak of 'faiths', and to use the associated adjectives, not only 'inter-faith' but also 'multi-faith'. In my view, this innovation creates a major new problem for English language theology. *Authentic theology* is the science of Faith, in the sense that 'Faith' is a quality of truthfulness (truth-as-openness) which cannot have a plural. But as soon as theologians themselves start operating with the word in its new, secular form, which

includes the idea of there being numerous tick-box, checklist-defined 'faiths' in the world, they have lapsed towards a way of speaking which, insofar as it prevails, tends to render authentic theology impossible. They have more or less immediately surrendered the key term of their discipline to a bureaucratic or journalistic mode of thought. It is a complete giveaway; a blowing of the seducer's cover. To the extent that such talk is taken seriously, this is no longer authentic theology. It can *only* be that age-old simulacrum of authentic theology: *church ideology*.

True Faith essentially differs from the 'faith' of church ideology by virtue of the sheer intensity with which it serves to energise the troubling imperatives of perfect truth-as-openness. So, it has the effect of rendering life, in the deepest sense, forever more difficult – rather than making it easier by closing down uncomfortable questions, as church ideology does, with immediate answers, claims to truth-as-correctness, loaded perhaps with manipulative offers of sweet consolation, or mere licensed rage. Church ideology may indeed rise to great heights of intellectual sophistication. But what, in the end, it serves to vindicate is just a basic unwillingness to listen with true – that is, truly *troubled* – sympathy to the Other.

In the past, authentic theology and church ideology have grown up, confused, together. But by 'church ideology' I mean, essentially, theology reduced to nothing more, in effect, than the mere self-understanding of a tick-box, checklist-defined 'faith'-community as such; its self-delimitation, self-justification and self-reinforcement. Such thinking may indeed come in various forms. Thus, *exclusivist* church ideology is the aggressive championing of a single such identity, represented as being in unique accord with metaphysical truth-as-correctness, to the exclusion of all others. *Inclusivist* church ideology is gentler, in that it allows a degree of significant truth-as-correctness in various different religious traditions – all, to be sure, understood in tick-box, checklist terms – even though still privileging one. *Pluralist* church ideology, meanwhile, positively celebrates religious pluralism, and yet still continues no less in thrall to the ideological notion of 'faith' suggested by 'inter-faith dialogue', in that it effectively tends to understand true (that is, correct) 'faith' as the mere lowest common denominator of all the many 'faiths'. 'Pluralist' church ideology indeed ticks all the boxes prescribed by secular liberal 'political correctness'; it remains, alas, all too hard-hearted in its *a priori* closure to everything that this excludes.

In a fallen world religious thought requires branding: for initial orientation's sake, quick crude identification. It is true that whatever truth may be involved is thereby immediately exposed to wholesale distortion. And yet,

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is not religion all about the popularising of Truth? To popularise is inevitably to risk vulgarising; it cannot be helped. Here, then, I have chosen to brand my argument '*neo-Hegelian*'. Why Hegel? Because he helps, more than any other thinker I know, to distinguish, in philosophic principle, authentic theology from church ideology in *any* form. Granted, this is not his terminology. Nor does Hegel have to deal with a language in which it has become possible to speak of 'faiths' in the plural: to this day, the German word *Glaube* remains immune from that development. In general, I think that the proper creative reception of Hegel's thought requires a good deal of terminological adaptation and innovation. But, nonetheless, the fact is that he focuses on the basic ambiguity of Christian doctrinal tradition, between (what I would call) authentic theology and its reduction into church ideology, with unique systematic radicalism. Hegel is the great original pioneer of systematic philosophic reflection on religious diversity. And his innovative work in this area actually springs, I think, from a profound commitment to xenophilia.

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I repeat: true Faith, as I understand it, is *in essence* an energising of perfect truth-as-openness. Hence, it is that potential quality *specifically of Abrahamic religion in general* which promotes the most radical xenophilia.

By 'xenophilia' I mean: a fundamental predisposition to love the strangeness of those who are strange just by virtue of temperament or life experience; or those who belong to another social class from one's own, another ethnic group or another nationality; or those who are shaped by different intellectual, cultural or religious traditions from one's own. Again, xenophilia is not only opposed to automatic mistrust and rejection of what is strange about other religions, as in exclusivist church ideology; it is equally opposed to the mere downplaying of, or indifference to, such strangeness, which is the no less unfortunate failing of inclusivist or, still more, pluralist church ideology. For is not divine grace by its very nature strange? Encounter with strangeness is, surely, *always* its proper medium.

Although I am a Christian priest, I used until recently to live in the midst of a large majority Haredi (in journalese, 'ultra-orthodox') Jewish community. My neighbours were mostly people busy bringing up very large families, as a religious duty, to help ensure the survival of their cultural traditions after so many centuries of Gentile oppression, or worse. This is a community acutely conscious of that history; the memory of which somewhat inclines them, with a fierce passion, to mistrust everything

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that I, as a Christian priest, represent. Nevertheless, I was part of a regular local discussion group bringing together devout Jewish people – not themselves exactly Haredim, since no true Haredi would participate in such a group, but people who mingle with and practise their religion alongside the Haredim – with a variety of Anglican, Roman Catholic, Unitarian and Pentecostalist Christians. This group included both clergy and lay people; also a wide range of intellectuals and non-intellectuals. We studied both classic and modern texts: it might be a passage from the Talmud, or from Justin Martyr, say; from Maimonides or Thomas Aquinas; a bit of Kabbalah or Julian of Norwich; a passage from Rosenzweig, Levinas or Barth. The conversation was given some grounding by the text, but it nevertheless tended to veer off in the most unpredictable directions, even on occasion quite anarchically. At all events, the more intellectual members of the group did not have everything their own way! There was a frank willingness on the part of the Christians present to acknowledge the frequent ugliness of past Christian treatment of Jews, and an open discussion of ongoing tensions between Christians and Jews, bound up with the politics of Israel. But, above all, what had developed there was a gathering of friends, bonded, very much, in a spirit of laughing, affectionate wonder at one another's sheer strangeness: Jew teasing Christian, and vice versa, but also Christian teasing Christian, Jew teasing Jew.¹

This, then, is what I mean by 'xenophilia'. And, having once lived for a while in Egypt, I have also experienced at least something of the same, albeit less deliberately organised, with Muslims. As a theologian, in this work, I want to explore the significance of Christ-the-Stranger, thinking especially of my own encounter with non-Christians.

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Chapter 1 is a further discussion of the concept of 'Faith', with primary reference to its incipient ambiguity already I think in the New Testament.

Then, in Chapter 2, I go on to discuss Hegel's particular contribution to the Christian-theological discussion of religious diversity. What really interests me here is the Hegelian concept of *Versöhnung* – 'Reconciliation' or, better, 'Atonement' – and, above all, how this is originally grounded in the argument of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) regarding the dissolution of *das unglückliche Bewußtsein*, literally 'the Unhappy Consciousness'. *Das unglückliche Bewußtsein* is a universal aspect of human experience, in all cultures: it is simply Hegel's general term for the condition of inner division, within the individual soul, between, on the one

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hand, the impulse to fresh, open moral thoughtfulness and, on the other, whatever resists that impulse. Thus, in the first instance, 'At-one-ment' here is just the overcoming of any such resistance. Hegel deploys the concept in order to open up an elementary criterion for religious truth, in general, absolutely cutting across the tick-box, checklist confessional boundary-definitions of church ideology and its various other religious equivalents. For, beyond any church-ideological anxiety about metaphysical or moral truth-as-correctness, his one, absolutely overriding primary concern is with the imperatives of perfect truth-as-openness, alone.

This discussion, moving as it does from the biblical phenomenon of 'Faith' back to the more general concept of 'Atonement', which 'Faith' in its own way mediates, provides me with a vantage point from which, next, to try and survey the whole matter of comparative religion. I call this vantage point the *criterion of Atonement* – the term is mine, but the underlying thought is Hegelian. And so, in Part Two, I take up the task, which Hegel first pioneered, of developing a systematic typology of religious traditions, ultimately in terms of their various relationships to 'Atonement', the healing of *das unglückliche Bewußtsein*. Hegel's own study of comparative religion, in his Berlin lecture series of 1821–31, is inevitably somewhat hampered by the lack of scholarly materials available to him back then. But he sets the basic terms of a project that may well be pursued a good deal more effectively today.

And finally, in Part Three, I return to the specific mode of Atonement ideally represented, celebrated and promoted by Christian faith at its best: to consider how that very same mode of Atonement, the work of God in Christ, may also in fact manifest itself quite directly, albeit anonymously, within particular other religious contexts.

Again, Hegel sets out the fundamental problem I seek to address. In principle, he argues, the Christian gospel is a great blast of atoning truth-potential. But *das unglückliche Bewußtsein* is endlessly resilient. In the form of church ideology, it infiltrates the tradition which was meant to have dissolved it and, by trivialising that tradition into a form of mere tick-box, checklist religious identity politics, seizes hold of it; subdues it, after all, to its own purposes. So, how are we to remedy this? Hegel's own answer is: by way of the sort of abstract philosophical argument he develops in the *Phenomenology*, highlighting the consequent ambiguities of the orthodox tradition, ineradicable though these remain at the level of popular religious practice.

Going beyond Hegel, however, it seems to me that there may also be considerable benefit in Christian theologians trying, *quite concretely*, to

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identify the latent presence of Christ at work in certain non-Christian phenomena; that is to say, altogether beyond the distorting sway of traditional church ideology. I therefore offer two prime possible examples, one from each of the two major traditions closest to Christianity, Islam and Judaism: first, the life and teaching of the great 9th–10th century CE Sufi mystic and martyr al-Hallaj; second, the extravagant sixteenth-century CE Kabbalist mythopoeia of Isaac Luria. These are two very different types of phenomena. What do they, nevertheless, have in common? They are both, precisely, fiery critical explosions of Faith – comparable to that involved in the original earthly life of Jesus – at the very furthest remove from ordinary tick-box, checklist religious ideology.

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Paul Knitter, in his eminently useable *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, proposes a basic four-fold classification of alternative Christian-theological approaches to the phenomena of religious diversity:

- The Replacement Model: 'only one true religion';
- The Fulfilment Model: 'the one fulfils the many';
- The Mutuality Model: 'many true religions called to dialogue';
- The Acceptance Model: 'many true religions: so be it'.²

He seeks to argue that there is a potential element of truth in each of these different models; that they are, in the end, complementary to one another. At one level, I agree.

Yet, at another level, note also how these four 'models' relate to one another historically. They are pretty heterogeneous constructs! The first two represent modes of thought dating right back to the earliest beginnings of the Church's theological tradition; although up until quite recently the Replacement Model was always dominant, and the Fulfilment Model seldom very boldly developed. But the latter two, the Mutuality and Acceptance Models, are both essentially responses to the new (post-Hegelian) opportunities, and challenges, arising out of the experience of life in modern, secular, religiously multicultural societies. They tend to emerge from a much closer focus on the actual theory and practice of non-Christian religion, on its own terms, than one finds anywhere in earlier Christian thought.

All four, moreover, represent mixed possibilities of both authentic Faith and its corruption into church ideology. Thus, what Knitter calls the *Replacement Model* includes all sorts of (what its enemies call) 'exclusivist'

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church ideology, essentially hostile to what it regards as rival religious traditions and to the whole ethos of secularism, but at the same time, very differently, the kind of possibility paradigmatically represented in the twentieth century by Karl Barth. There is indeed nothing church-ideological about Barth's thought. By 'ideology', in general, I mean the sort of thinking that contributes to the formation, and maintenance, of a human herd- or gang-culture. Barthian theology is not doing that. On the contrary! Only, Barth represents a form of theology whose chief critical focus is very much on the inroads of *secular* ideology, as such, into the thought of the Church. Therefore, the primary target of his critique is the sort of theological liberalism that flows into 'inclusivist' or 'pluralist' church ideology, friendly to secularism, rather than the militantly anti-secular 'exclusivist' variant. This one-sided critical emphasis does not, by any means, make him a positive ally of exclusivist *church ideology*, as such. But friendly theological dialogue with other religious traditions was simply never a major concern of his. And where he does address the topic, in *Church Dogmatics* 1: 2, § 17, he remains chiefly concerned to criticise the elements of traditional inclusivist, and incipient pluralist, church ideology in the liberal Neo-Protestantism which is always his chief adversary.³

As for the *Fulfilment Model*: this would seem, on the one hand, to include all sorts of soft, liberal, 'inclusivist' church ideology – but also very differently, on the other hand, the basic anti-ideological framework for Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* for instance, as Hegel here sets out to envisage the whole of human religious history as a single, ongoing process of divine self-revelation.⁴ Hegel differs from Barth in that he is concerned to point beyond church ideology just as much in its more conservative variants as in the relatively liberal form he (perhaps to some extent unfairly) saw represented by Schleiermacher, for instance. But, again, this critical emphasis of his by no means makes him a defender of the sort of church ideology Barth attacks. (Even if Barth himself was a little inclined, mistakenly, to suspect that it did – seeing 'Hegelianism' merely as a rival version of such 'liberalism' to Schleiermacher's.) No Christian thinker is more *radically* critical of what I am calling church ideology, in general, than Hegel.

And the later evolving *Mutuality* and *Acceptance Models* are likewise ambivalent. For these are broad categories, potentially, it seems, including various kinds of somewhat indiscriminating 'pluralist' church ideology alongside – on the contrary – a good many very different examples of authentic theological critique. The Mutuality Model is a category which embraces all manner of engagement in conversation across religious

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boundaries in a secular-multicultural context, involving an emphasis on the participants' shared civil or simply 'human' identities. But, by contrast, the Acceptance Model embraces all manner of engagement in such conversation on the basis of the participants' respect for one another's confessional distinctiveness. These are basically twin twentieth-century phenomena, in origin.

Hegel, for his part, was a celebrant of *whatever* drives moral thought on towards a closer engagement with actual reality. So he would no doubt have welcomed the sort of conversation processes out of which both the Mutuality and the Acceptance Models have subsequently emerged, and would have seen a rich potential for truth in both, just so long as neither is seen as excluding the other. Once again, though, everything nevertheless also depends upon our carefully distinguishing the true forms of both, alike, from mere pluralist *church ideology*; that is, from a type of thinking more concerned with easy, indiscriminating accommodation than with the proper fieriness of Truth. This is where I think that, after all, the Hegelian contribution still does remain supremely helpful – as I hope to show.

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And now: just one further preliminary clarification. Let me reiterate, I am by no means denying that much of what passes under the name of 'inter-faith dialogue' is quite admirable. I think much of it truly is. Indeed, that is why it needs rescuing. My objection is only to that name, that way of 'placing' the enterprise; and to the way it tends to insulate the xenophile impulse at work here, diverting it towards a bureaucratic or journalistic mode of self-expression, which unfortunately disempowers it.

Knitter distinguishes four 'models'. Roman Catholic official documents, in recent years, have tended to speak of 'four-fold dialogue' between Christian and non-Christian in the quite different sense of its proceeding on four levels.⁵ Thus, there is 'the dialogue of life', that is, the simple development of warm humane friendship across the confessional divide; 'the dialogue of action', arising out of collaboration in shared political or cultural enterprises; 'the dialogue of religious experience', involving discussion of prayer-practice; and 'the dialogue of theological exchange'. The harm done by the notion of 'inter-faith dialogue' only really impinges upon the fourth of these. Nor does it perhaps – even at that level – do all that much damage to the dialogue *in itself*. The harm lies, rather, in its downplaying the truth-potential of such dialogue in relation to the rest of