

Religious Commitment to One's Own Religion and Acceptance of Other Religions

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Introduction

There would seem to be a tension between religious commitments, the commitment one may have to one's own religion, and the acceptance of other religions. In fact, however, there are several forms of religious commitment that can lie down peaceably with several forms of that half-hearted acceptance of other religions that is religious tolerance.¹ Yet the initial impression of opposition is in a way correct, for there is a recalcitrant, seemingly irresolvable, tension between a significant form of religious commitment and a significant form of acceptance of other religions. This form of religious commitment is an important vehicle for commitment in different traditions, particularly in the Abrahamic theistic traditions of the West, but not in these alone. It is this form of commitment that is expressed when a Jew proclaims that she or he believes that "God's law was given once and for all on Sinai," when a Muslim proclaims her or his belief that "There is one God and Muhammad is his messenger" and when a Buddhist proclaims that she or he believes that "Siddhārtha Gautama is the Buddha." In each case the expression of commitment is *through* an expression of belief, a belief about the essential nature of religious reality, and in each case the belief is close to the core of the religion. I shall call this form of commitment *alpha-commitment*.

The form of acceptance of other religions that is in apparently unavoidable opposition to these expressions of alpha-commitment is the wide-ranging and deep form of wholehearted acceptance that says "All the world religions are right, not mine alone." By "world religions" I intend

1. Jay Newman characterizes tolerance as a half-hearted acceptance or putting up with what is not liked or respected. Jay Newman, *Foundations of Religious Tolerance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 4–6.

religions that are worldwide, being represented on several continents, with millions of followers—approximately the same religions that John Hick refers to as the “great world faiths.”² Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are among the world religions. I shall call this form of acceptance *omega-acceptance*. The main concern of this paper is whether alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance are affectively compatible (as self-discipline and generosity are and love and hate are not) so that persons could *without tension* have both alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance. The question raised here is not the psychological question whether there could be a person who holds both attitudes without tension. Perhaps there could be, as it is possible for some insouciantly to hold contradictory beliefs. The question raised here is whether, given the nature of these two attitudes, could they both generally coexist in persons without tension: Do their *natures* allow them to be held without tension?

If our question were whether religious commitment to one’s own religion and religious acceptance of other religions are affectively compatible we could answer it fairly easily. Several forms of religious commitment can coexist with several forms of half-hearted acceptance or religious tolerance without tension. For instance, one could be religiously committed by providing financial support to one’s temple, church or mosque or by following the teachings of one’s religion, consciously walking in the way of one’s religion; and at the same time one could be tolerant of other religions by being friendly toward those in other religious traditions or by avoiding disputes about religious matters and differences and avoiding making negative comments about other religious traditions or by thinking of different religions in terms of different holy days and festivals and following the principle “You observe your holy days and I will observe mine.” The opposition between alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance is more intractable.

Alpha-commitment

Let us consider both alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance more carefully, starting with alpha-commitment. Alpha-commitment is expressed

2. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 12.

through an expression of belief. One thing to note is that alpha-commitment requires the affirmation of certainty in the expression of belief used to express alpha-commit. More carefully put, the degree of alpha-commitment expressed increases with the degree of certainty affirmed and decreases to a vanishing point when little or no certainty is affirmed. Alpha-commitment can be expressed by one's saying "I know it is so!" or "I believe it is so!" with their conveyance of certainty, but not by "I think it may be so" or "I believe it may be so, but I am not sure." If a Jewish believer says "I think that it may be God's law was given once and for all on Sinai," or if a Christian says "I think that Jesus Christ may be the Son of God, but I am not sure," or if a Buddhist says "I think that Siddhārtha Gautama is the Buddha, but I am not certain," the degree of commitment expressed is less than the full commitment of alpha-commitment, if it is commitment at all. In general lukewarm commitment may be an oxymoron: it certainly is when the commitment is alpha-commitment.

Omega-acceptance

Omega-acceptance is not merely a friendly reaction to persons who are followers of a religion other than one's own. It is an acceptance of the religions of others. And it is a wholehearted acceptance of other religions that is more than refraining from arguing about religious matters and differences and more than endorsing protection of religions other than one's own under the law. Omega-acceptance is accepting other religions as right. What is it for a religion to be "right"? One way is through its having only true beliefs, or having only true core beliefs. But, it is to be noted, this is not the only way a religion can be right. For John Hick a religion can be right in having "mythologically true" beliefs. As I shall try to show later, there is another significant way that a religion can be right, and, as I shall try to show, this way is both grounded in forms of religious self-understanding and identifiable religious sensibilities and provides a way for the religious to have alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance together.

The apparent affective incompatibility between alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance

Is alpha-commitment affectively compatible with omega-acceptance? They are not if we understand a religion's being right in terms of having only true beliefs or only true core beliefs. If we hold one religion—our religion—to be right in this sense, then we must hold all other religions with beliefs or core beliefs that are logically incompatible with those of our religion to be not right. Given this implication it is inescapable that if we have alpha-commitment to our religion, we cannot compatibly have omega-acceptance toward the other world religions, if they have beliefs or core beliefs logically incompatible with those of our own religion. Are the world religions incompatible? Are their core beliefs logically incompatible?

When we compare theistic religious traditions, like Conservative Judaism and mainstream Christianity, with nontheistic religious traditions, like Buddhism and Hinduism in its *advaitist* form, we find at the core of theistic religions a belief that is incompatible with a belief at the core of nontheistic religions. For theistic religions the deepest religious reality is God, a personal God, while for the nontheistic religions the deepest religious reality is not a personal God.

A similar logical incompatibility of belief holds within the theistic Abrahamic religions. In traditional understanding they are incompatible with each other. A core belief of Judaism is "God's law was given once and for all on Sinai." A core belief of Christianity is "Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And a core belief of Islam is "There is one God and Muhammad is his messenger." If God's law was given once and for all on Sinai, it cannot be given a new understanding by Jesus or supplanted by Muhammad's message.

Again, when we compare nontheistic religions with each other we find incompatible beliefs. The place given to Gautama Buddha in Buddhism is not the place given to the Buddha in Hinduism, which recognizes the Buddha as only one of the avatars of Vishnu.

It may be commonplace to think one's religion to be right by virtue of the truth of its core beliefs. However, if we understand "right" to mean having only true beliefs or only true core beliefs, in order to have alpha-commitment one must not have omega-acceptance and to have omega-acceptance one must not have alpha-commitment. One can have one, but not both. Yet with

this understanding of what it is for a religion to be right there are, in fact, a number of ways to have one while not having the other. Before we turn to a better way to understand the rightness of different religions, in the next two sections we will explore how, under the assumption that a religion is right because its core beliefs are true, there are different ways of having alpha-commitment while sacrificing omega-acceptance and different ways of having omega-acceptance while sacrificing alpha-commitment.

Having alpha-commitment at the cost of not having omega-acceptance

There are at least two ways that a person holding that religions are right by virtue of having only true beliefs or only true core beliefs can have alpha-commitment while rejecting omega-acceptance. First, one could accept one's own religion as right and reject all others with incompatible beliefs or core beliefs as not right. Doing so rules out omega-acceptance, but since the acceptance of one's own religion could be through the deep commitment of alpha-commitment, alpha-commitment is allowed a place. This position accepts a truth-claim form of that view of the relationship between world religions that is known as religious exclusivism.

A Christian religious exclusivist like Alvin Plantinga believes that:

Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son.³

Taking this belief as true, Plantinga consequently takes as false all propositions not logically compatible with it, as he must. His belief contains the claim that Christianity provides "a unique way of salvation." Allowing that a "unique way of salvation" means the one and only way of salvation, Plantinga's acceptance of this belief requires the rejection of all those beliefs that deny that Christianity provides the one and only way of salvation, that is, of core beliefs of all non-Christian religions. Clearly it would not violate his position if Plantinga affirmed his religious commitment by affirming

3. Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism" in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, edited by Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). Reprinted in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173.

with certainty the truth of his belief. In this way his exclusivist position allows and may even welcome and encourage alpha-commitment.

Of course religious commitment for the exclusivist is in place at the cost of omega-acceptance, given that right religions have only true beliefs or only true core beliefs. True, a religious exclusivist can say that believers in other religions, convinced of the truth of their core beliefs, may regard the religious exclusivist's religion as wrong just as he or she regards their religions as wrong. And a religious exclusivist can be tolerant in other ways. She or he can be friends with those in other religions, and be tolerant of them as persons, and, a tendency toward proselytization notwithstanding, even be tolerant of their religions in various ways—for instance, in being in favor of the state not forbidding their religious practices and being in favor of their having a legal status similar to that of his or her own religion. A religious exclusivist, however, cannot have any tolerance for the possibility that all of their religions are right religions if right religions are right by virtue of the truth of their beliefs or the truth of their core beliefs.

There is a second way that one who understands a right religion to have only true beliefs or only true core beliefs might have alpha-commitment at the cost of omega-acceptance. It is the way of the religious inclusivist. A religious inclusivist—one who holds that one's religion alone is right but other religions may participate in its rightness and so are included—can easily affirm alpha-commitment to her or his religion. The participation in the rightness of her or his own religion that the inclusivist allows, however, is understood in terms of the truth of the beliefs of her or his religion. Thus Karl Rahner, the originator of inclusivism, understands non-Christian religions as being “included” by virtue of “the grace given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ.”⁴ The religious inclusivist can be tolerant of individuals in other religions, and tolerant of other religions, in the ways open to a religious exclusivist. But omega-acceptance is not open to the religious inclusivist. She or he cannot allow that other religions are right *in themselves*, for they deny the core beliefs of her or his religion. They have value, but they have value only because of the inclusivist nature of the inclusivist's own religion, which alone is right.

4. Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, trans. Karl-H Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 121.

Having omega-acceptance at the cost of not having alpha-commitment

Conversely, still proceeding under the assumption that right religions have only true beliefs or only true core beliefs, there are several ways of being omega-accepting at the cost of alpha-commitment. First, one might allow that there is a religious truth, but we do not know which religious beliefs are true and which are not true. "My religion may be right," this position allows, "but also it may not be right, and other religions may be right." Or, in what we may count as an alternative expression of this position or else a closely related position, it is allowed that there are many paths to religious truth (whatever it should turn out to be). Shivesh Thakur recognizes a "dilemma" between commitment to one's own religion and a "profession of genuine respect for all religions" (which echoes the opposition between alpha-commitment and omega-acceptance). There are, he suggests, only two ways out of this dilemma.

Following the first alternative suggested by Thakur, one may say that there is one religious truth, and it may belong to the beliefs of one's own religion, but it may belong to the beliefs of another religion, so that, if one is a theist, one will say in effect, "Only God knows what is ultimately true, and although God impels me to accept Christianity, or Islam or Judaism, the true way in the end may be Buddhist or Hindu." Alternatively, for Thakur, one may concede like the Hindu, that truth is one, but sages call it by many a name... Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, etc." On this alternative the "one truth" would be an overarching claim compatible with the beliefs of world religions, such as that there is a religious reality. For Thakur, if one cannot follow either of these two alternatives, because of commitment to one's own religion, then "any profession of respect for other religions on his or her part is either impossible or hypocritical."⁵

Thakur's second alternative, let us allow, is a variant expression of, what Arvind Sharma sees as an approximation of the Hindu or the Neo-Hindu position: all religions are paths to the truth; though the paths are different, the goal is the same. The Hindu position, for Sharma, is that "all approaches

5. Shivesh Thakur, "To What God...?" in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. John Hick and Hasan Askari (Aldershot, England and Brookfield, Vermont: Gower, 1985), 121–22 and 130 (I have changed slightly Thakur's wording in the theist's articulation of her/his position).

to God are valid” in the sense of being useful paths for some persons to approach religious reality. While there can be inter-religious dialogue, “the validity of another religion cannot be *absolutely* questioned.” And here by “validity” Sharma means propositional truth. Questioning is allowable, but *absolute questioning*, which is aimed at refuting or “*debunk[ing]* in terms of false versus true” the validity or truth of another religion’s beliefs, is not allowed by the Hindu position. For Hinduism one religion cannot be designated true and the rest false, since from the Hindu perspective there is prejudice in the belief in “one’s own inerrancy.”⁶ This sounds like Thakur’s first alternative for escaping the dilemma between commitment to one’s own religion and respect for other religions. One, in effect, allows that one’s own core religious beliefs may be false and those of other religions may be true.

Allowing that Thakur and Sharma together give us the “Hindu position,” or one of them or part of it, that position contains in its two expressions one way of being omega-accepting. It allows that one’s religion’s core beliefs may be right or wrong, like those of other religions, and all religions share the possibility of turning out to be true; and it allows that all religions are paths to an overarching religious truth. There are, I think, some strengths in this position.

Although Hinduism is an ancient tradition, in holding this position it anticipates a modern sensibility regarding the limits of what we know. Second, and relatedly, this position exhibits an appropriately humble open mindedness in an age aware of religious plurality and, beyond open mindedness, exhibits a cast of mind that regards the question of religious truth as still open, again in accord with a strain of modern sensibility. At the same time it allows different forms of religious commitment, including worship of God. It does not, however, allow full alpha-commitment, for, although it allows one to affirm the core beliefs of one’s religious tradition, the expression of certainty is ruled out in that one’s affirmation of belief is accompanied with at least the interior acknowledgment that one’s belief may be wrong.

6. Arvind Sharma, “All Religions are: Equal? One? True? Same?: A Critical Examination of Some Formulations of the Neo-Hindu Position,” *Philosophy East and West* 29 (Jan., 1979): 63, 64, 67, 72, n. 67 (My emphasis on “absolutely.” Sharma’s emphasis on “debunk[ing]”).

Another way to be omega-accepting at the cost of alpha-commitment, while understanding religions to be right by virtue of holding only true beliefs or only true core beliefs, is provided by John Hick in the religious pluralism that he has developed. In a neo-Kantian element of Hick's position different religious beliefs, such as the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity and the Buddhist belief in the *dharmakāya*, the cosmic Buddha-nature or Dharma Body, are not about religious reality itself but about different phenomenal "manifestations" of religious reality.⁷ Hick's phenomenal-manifestation construction eliminates logical conflict between religious beliefs, for the beliefs of different religions are about different things, different manifestations of religious reality, as opposed to religious reality itself, and hence not in conflict.

There is a second element of Hick's religious pluralism to be noted. In this second element of Hick's thought the rightness of a religion is not understood in terms of the truth, the literal truth, of its beliefs. As Hick has developed this part of his view a religious person in a theistic tradition may regard different core beliefs about God as not literally true but as "mythologically true," understanding a mythologically true belief to be one that is not literally true but nevertheless "evokes an appropriate dispositional attitude" to religious reality. A Christian might regard her or his belief in Christ's resurrection as mythologically true in this way. Similarly, a Buddhist might regard her or his belief in the heavenly Buddhas as mythologically true.⁸ There is no contradiction in allowing all the core beliefs of the major religions to be mythologically true for their respective followers. And if the core beliefs of the major religions are mythologically true, then they are not literally true (or false) and consequently not logically incompatible.

However, Hick's mythological-truth treatment of religious belief and his "manifestation" construction, taken together or individually, challenge the self-understanding of many who are religious (since they take their beliefs to be literally true and to be about religious reality itself and not one

7. John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 43.

8. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 348; 370–71. Hick does not pronounce on which specific religious "trans-historical" religious beliefs are "true or false myths rather than true or false factual assertions" (371).

of several phenomenal manifestations of it). If one is a Christian, or a Jew or Muslim or Buddhist, there are certain distinctive theological or religious beliefs that one must *affirm*. And if one is a traditional follower of one's tradition, one takes one's affirmed belief to be about the deepest nature of religious reality, not about a "manifestation" of it, and to be at odds with and to deny the incompatible beliefs of other traditions that are similarly affirmed of religious reality itself by believers in those other traditions. The problem with construing religious beliefs as acceptance of myths or as beliefs about a "manifestation" of religious reality is that it, unlike the "Hindu position" (which allows the affirmation that the core beliefs of one's religion *may* be true of religious reality), discountenances this traditional religious need-to-affirm.⁹

Hick is aware that his view has implications for a one-tradition commitment and has commented on it:

I try to contribute to the on-going development of Christian thought in the light of our knowledge of the wider religious world. After all, right from the beginning the Christian belief-system has been changing all the time, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly, in response to developments in human knowledge and experience. Occasionally a major change, a 'paradigm shift', occurs.... And I believe that [a] major shift is needed today in response to our new awareness of the other world religions.¹⁰

In this way Hick might say that the need-to-affirm in the future will cease to be a need in Christianity in the light of the "on-going development of Christian thought" that he is encouraging.

As things are, in the present, one following the two ways Hick gives us of understanding religious belief could be accepting of all the world religions in that no world religion would be seen as having false beliefs about religious reality (or, indeed, about God or any other phenomenal "manifestation" of religious reality) and all could be seen as mythologically true. At the same time there is an impaired opportunity for an affirmation of belief for those who would follow Hick's lead here, and *a fortiori*, alpha-commitment would for them be ruled out.

9. This need-to-affirm is, I think, a *traditional* religious need, found in many religions, if not quite all. Some would say that it is not a need in *advaitist* Hinduism or in mystical religious strains. Arguably, it also is not a need for religious non-realists like Don Cupitt.

10. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 43–44.

A more promising way of understanding the rightness of religions: theistic religions

We now turn to another and more promising way of understanding the rightness of different religious traditions. Omega-acceptance is the acceptance of the major religions of the world as right. However, there is more than one way for a religion to be right. Having only true beliefs or only true core beliefs is one of the ways a religion can be right, but it is only one way. Hick shows us another way with his category of “mythological truth.” Another way to understand a religion’s being right is that it *opens the way to a right relationship to religious reality*. What is a right relationship to religious reality is different in theistic and nontheistic traditions; yet this understanding of the rightness of religious traditions applies to both theistic and nontheistic traditions, as we shall see. In this section we will explore its application to theistic traditions and in the next section its application to nontheistic traditions. For theistic religions a right relationship to religious reality is a right relationship to God, and on this understanding of the rightness of religions different theistic traditions can be right in that they all *open the way to faith in God*. If one’s own theistic religion can be right by opening a way to faith in God, then other theistic religions would also be right if they too opened a way to faith in God. But do different theistic religions open a way to faith in God, faith in the same God, faith in the one God? Or is the object of faith in the different religions different? If religious faith in God shares certain basic features with faith in persons, then different theistic religions can be seen to open a way to faith in the one God, and they would do so even if different religions hold incompatible concepts of God. We can make this clear by reflecting on the following example of faith in a person.

Let us imagine two persons who are in need of significant aid. One needs aid in the form of a near miraculous cure for her brother. The other needs aid in the form of gaining the release of his brother from a prison in a totalitarian state. A stranger to both of these persons offers the needed aid to each and promises to each to provide the aid they respectively hope for. The stranger speaks to each person in her or his setting, but only briefly. Still the stranger, who asks for nothing in return, makes a strong impression on each, and each of the two persons comes to have faith in the stranger, to trust the stranger to keep the promise the stranger made to help. The two persons who

need the stranger's aid think of the stranger differently. They have different conceptions of the stranger. The first thinks of the stranger as a kind of medical renegade who has gained hermetic skills through a life devoted to arcane studies. The second thinks of the stranger as a powerfully connected diplomat, whose life spent in international relations makes it possible to call in favors. Each of the two persons has faith in the stranger, but the two have different and even incompatible conceptions of the stranger. At least one has a wrong conception of the stranger. Yet both have faith in and trust in the same person, the stranger. Although in the scenario as presented the stranger briefly meets and speaks to the two persons in need, the element of personal encounter is not necessary. Each of the two could come to trust the stranger after hearing from friends stories about the stranger and the stranger's promise and ability to help those in need. In the same way, clearly it would not change matters if there were more than two persons trusting in the stranger. There might be an extended family with branches in different hemispheres, and when individuals in this family need aid the stranger would mysteriously appear and promise aid, which would then often if not always be forthcoming. In these different family branches different stories are told about the stranger and within these stories are embedded different and incompatible conceptions of the stranger.¹¹

This scenario exhibits three features of faith-in:

1. faith-in is essentially trust-in
2. faith-in as trust-in does not require a true conception of the one who is trusted
3. faith-in as trust-in allows that two persons with incompatible conceptions of the one they trust may nevertheless be trusting the same person

These three elements are part of the logic of faith-in and as such hold as well for faith in God. If we apply these elements of the logic of faith-in to faith in God, we obtain these corollaries:

11. I have adapted the example of the stranger from my *God-Relationships With and Without God* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 76–77. Perhaps one might raise the question whether the two persons in need *reasonably* trust the stranger. That question, however, is not relevant to whether they trust the same person despite different conceptions of that person.

1. faith in God is essentially trust in God
2. faith in God as trust in God does not require a true conception of God
3. faith in God as trust in God allows that two persons with incompatible conceptions of God may nevertheless be trusting the same God

The analysis or understanding of faith in God that I have offered is in opposition to thinking that having the wrong concept of God causes one's faith not to be in God, the true God, or leads one's faith to be in the wrong God. For this way of thinking the concept of God directs faith or trust to its object; a wrong concept, or wrong enough concept, directs faith to the wrong object. Peter Geach seems to have held this view. Geach says "a sufficiently erroneous thought of a God will simply fail to relate to the true and living God at all."¹² If we think of God wrongly enough, then our thoughts and our worship miss the mark (and perhaps hit another object). Geach's concern is with *worshipping* the right God and having one's thoughts *relate to* the right God, not with having faith in the right God. But the extension of his thinking is clear enough. (Little or no extension may be required if, as Kierkegaard said, worship is "the expression of faith.")¹³ When is a thought of God "sufficiently erroneous" so that it will not relate to the true God? Geach is not sure and says "Where the line is to be drawn God only knows," although Geach is sure there is a line.¹⁴

The problem with Geach's analysis—if it is applied to faith-in God—is that it is contrary to the logic of faith-in that examples like the "stranger" example amply exhibit. To be sure there are conceptual requirements of faith-in. However they flow from the trust attitude itself. In order for one to trust another, in general the one trusted must be conceived or believed to be good (the one trusted must be believed to be beneficent toward one),

12. Peter Geach, "On Worshipping the Right God" in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 111.

13. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 129.

14. Geach, "On Worshipping the Right God," 111. Geach seems to take back his claim that when a thought is "sufficiently erroneous" it will not relate to the true God when he says, "If a man comes to worship a God because the true God 'calls and draws him,' then certainly this worship will be directed towards the true God, however inadequately conceived" (112).

powerful (the one trusted must be believed to have the ability to bring about the intended good), and wise (the one trusted must be believed to know what is good for one and how to bring it about). Similarly, in order to have faith in God one must conceive of God as good, powerful, and wise, for, again, without these attributions trust is rendered impossible. That is, in order to trust in God one must believe that God will act beneficently toward oneself and others, that God is able to act beneficently toward oneself and others, and that God understands what will be for the good.¹⁵ However, other elements of one's religious conception may be "erroneous" without destroying one's faith in God or making one's faith not "relate to" God. In the three Abrahamic religions God is of course traditionally conceived of as good, powerful, and wise (in fact as all-good, all-powerful, and all-wise.) This is not accidental since these three religions give a central place to faith in God. However, the faith-in relationship itself does not require belief in further divine attributes or further doctrinal beliefs. In this way the three Abrahamic theistic traditions can all accommodate faith in God, understood as the same God.

The issue here between the understanding of faith in God offered by Geach's thinking and the understanding of faith in God that I have suggested is related to whether there is one God with many names or conceptions, or different Gods or gods, one for each name or conception. Hick apparently holds the latter view. On Hick's view, as we have noted, while there is but one religious reality, there are various manifestations of it and these manifestations of religious reality, which are the objects of devotion and reverence in the various religious traditions, are different and distinct. For Hick, then, the religious objects, the objects of faith, worship, and devotion in the different theistic religions are different. For Judaism it is Yaweh; for Christianity it is the Holy Trinity; for Islam it is Allah.

Hick's view, like Geach's, however, is at odds with the understanding of faith-in found in the example of the stranger. Given that understanding

15. While trust in God requires the belief that God will act beneficently toward oneself and others and the belief that God is able to act beneficently toward oneself and others, the first belief does not require an understanding of how God's beneficence toward oneself and others will manifest itself, and the second belief does not require an understanding of how God will act or of the nature of God's action. Similarly the belief that God is wise and understands what will be for the good (which was noted as a required belief by John Parra in discussion) does not require our understanding what will be for the good.

and its implied analysis of faith in God, we may set to one side both Hick's neo-Kantian view and Geach's view as they relate to faith in God.

Explicit in the analysis of faith in God that is offered here are:

1. Two persons in different theistic traditions can have faith in the same God though they have incompatible concepts of God.

And,

2. Faith in God does not require the right or true concept of God.

But, then there is a further implication,

3. The above two points can be appreciated by believers in different theistic traditions without violating their own faith in God.

Thus one can recognize that individual believers in the Abrahamic religions, and perhaps in other theistic religions, have faith in God. If one has faith in God and recognizes that one's religion is right by virtue of allowing faith in God, then one can recognize that other religions are right by virtue of allowing faith in God. They are right in that they too, like one's own religion, allow a right relationship to God, a faith relationship. One with this recognition would be omega-accepting toward at least the Abrahamic theistic religions

If the analysis or understanding of faith-in used in this approach is correct, then there can be faith/trust relationships to God in various theistic religions, particularly in the Abrahamic religions, even if those religions hold incompatible religious beliefs about God. Jews, Christians, and Muslims can allow that all three of their religions are right by virtue of allowing faith in God. And at the same time they can recognize that they hold incompatible beliefs. Incompatible beliefs would remain, but they would not mean that if one of these Abrahamic religions is right, the others cannot be. For all can be right, not by virtue of the truth of their beliefs, but by virtue of allowing the opportunity for faith in God.

And one with omega-acceptance toward other religions can have, along with faith in God, alpha-commitment by virtue of believing with certainty the core beliefs of her or his religion. A Christian may affirm her

or his faith in God precisely by affirming with certainty and with alpha-commitment her or his belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God or, to use the words of Alvin Plantinga, that “God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son.” A Jew may affirm her or his alpha-commit by affirming her or his belief that God’s law was given to Moses once and for all on Sinai, and may affirm her or his faith in God thereby. And a Muslim may affirm her or his alpha-commitment by affirming her or his belief that Muhammad is God’s final messenger, and may affirm her/his faith in God by doing so. So not only can alpha-commitment be held by one who is omega-accepting, but the beliefs used to affirm alpha-commitment by believers in different religions, and to affirm their faith in God, can be logically incompatible.

The understanding of faith-in that I have presented does not mean that there is no true concept of God, nor does it mean that it is religiously unimportant to have true beliefs about God. For theistic believers there of course can be good reasons to have a correct concept of God, beyond the requirements of faith-in (in order to understand better what God requires or wills or how God’s goodness will be expressed) and to have true beliefs about God.

Even in the light of these caveats, it remains that accepting the truth of the beliefs of one’s own religion, and accepting it that those beliefs are incompatible with beliefs of other religions, does not constrain one to regard those religions as wrong in the sense of closing off faith in God. One is constrained only to recognize that the beliefs of other religions that are incompatible with those of one’s own religion are false. This recognition does not require one to be a religious exclusivist. Other religions that hold beliefs incompatible with one’s own will be seen as holding false beliefs (of course). But they are not therefore wrong religions and need not be regarded as wrong religions. If other religions open a way to faith in God they are right religions in this sense, and they can and should be regarded as right religions in this sense by those who have faith in God.

So far I have argued that an understanding of faith in God allows those in the different Western theistic traditions, the Abrahamic traditions, to accept as right theistic traditions other than their own if they open a way to faith in God. Faith relationships presuppose a theistic tradition, and a conception of God that accommodates faith-in or trust-in. What about theistic traditions other than the Abrahamic traditions? What should be said about,

for instance, the Sikh tradition and devotional or *bhakti* Hinduism? In *bhakti* Hinduism the deity worshipped is conceived to be loving, compassionate, merciful. And this conception would accommodate faith-in. But also the worshipped deity, named as Vishnu or Shiva, may be put in the role of lover or bridegroom or one's child, as well as father or mother.¹⁶ The Song of Solomon notwithstanding, this suggests a greater latitude in the religious relationship allowed by Hinduism than the central faith-relationship in the Western theistic traditions. However, all these relationships are personal relationships and each embodies a form of devotion. Devotion, like faith-in, allows incompatible conceptions and does not presuppose a true conception. And so, *mutatis mutandis*, what we have argued regarding faith-in can be extended to devotional attitudes toward God or the divine; and, furthermore, allowing that theistic religions are in general characterized by devotion to God or the divine, this understanding of devotional attitudes, as an extended faith-in understanding, can be applied to all theistic religions.¹⁷

A more promising way of understanding the rightness of religions: nontheistic traditions

It will have been noted that the omega-acceptance on the part of those in theistic traditions that was presented and justified in the last section extends only to other theistic traditions. In this section we will see how understanding the rightness of religions as opening the way to a right relationship to religious reality applies to nontheistic traditions. But we will also see how this understanding of the rightness of religion, while allowing alpha-commitment to one's own religion, can make omega-acceptance of *all* religions possible for both theistic and nontheistic traditions.

How does the understanding of the rightness of religion as *opening the way to a right relationship to religious reality* apply to nontheistic religious traditions like Buddhism? Buddhism takes many forms, and some of its forms may be amenable to an application of an extended faith-in understanding. In Amida Buddhism or Pure Land Buddhism there is veneration of Amida

16. Vasudha Narayanan, "The Hindu Tradition" in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed. *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* 2nd ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 64 and 79.

17. Most clearly, perhaps, this faith-in understanding can be applied to monotheistic religions, but it may also be applied to those polytheistic religions where there is devotion to a deity or deities.

Buddha, to whom thanks may be given and in whom followers may have faith. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition followers may have a relationship of hope-in to Avalokiteśvara or another *bodhisattva*, and as faith in God does not require a true conception of God, so hope in a *bodhisattva* does not require a true conception of the *bodhisattva* and allows incompatible conceptions. Avalokiteśvara is male in India and female in China.¹⁸

In these forms of Buddhism, then, there is faith-in or hope-in, and there is as well a form of devotion. Although there is a great conceptual difference between God in the Western theistic traditions, on the one hand, and a Buddha or a *bodhisattva* in the Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, since faith-in, hope-in, and devotion do not require a true conception of their object, it is open to us to allow that the object of faith-in or hope-in or devotion is in all these cases religious reality, the same religious reality that is the object of faith in the Abrahamic theistic religions, and that religious adherents in all these traditions are rightly related through their faith or hope or devotion to that religious reality. All of these religious traditions, then, would be right in allowing a right relationship to religious reality.

Some strains of nontheistic traditions, however, are more resolutely nontheistic and allow no place for faith-in or hope-in or even devotion to a personalized religious reality. Some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism generally, and *advaita* Hinduism are resolutely nontheistic in this way. Yet these traditions too allow a right relationship to religious reality, not by virtue of faith-in, hope-in, or devotion, but by virtue of right action and compassion. In all the traditions of the world religions there is an encouragement of right action and compassion. Of course what will count as “right action” may vary somewhat among these traditions. In the Buddhist tradition the Eightfold Path addresses right thought and right speech, and more, as well as right action. In fact not only in Buddhism but also in all the world traditions, theistic and nontheistic, “right action” in its full scope involves interior action expressed in humility and a turning from selfish desire and self-concern. John Hick refers to this universal feature of world religious traditions when he speaks of a movement in these traditions from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, and

18. Roy C. Amore and Julia Ching, “The Buddhist Tradition” in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* 2nd ed., 247.

Keith Ward says something very similar.¹⁹ Understanding the movement from self-centeredness to a centeredness on religious reality in terms of a reorientation of life significantly expressed in interior and exterior action, we may say that in each of these world traditions, theistic and nontheistic, there is this reorientation and relationship to religious reality, although the conceptions of religious reality in these nontheistic traditions would be incompatible with theistic conceptions and would vary among themselves. For those in resolutely nontheistic forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism right action and compassion could create a right relationship to religious reality, conceived of as *dharmakāya*, the cosmic Buddha-nature or Dharma Body. For those in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition right action and compassion could be a right relationship to the “way of the elders.” And in the *advaitist* Hindu tradition right action and compassion could be a right relationship to Brahman.

Just as faith-in, hope-in, and devotion allow incompatible conceptions of the religious object of faith, hope, or devotion, so right action and compassion allow incompatible conceptions of the religious reality to which right action and compassion relate the religious individual. It is open to a Buddhist to see a Jew, Christian, or Muslim by virtue of her or his right actions and compassion for those in suffering as being rightly related to the path to Buddhahood, and it is open to a Jew, Christian, or Muslim to see a Buddhist by virtue of her or his right actions and compassion for those in suffering as being rightly related to God. In general for those in the Abrahamic traditions, all of these right relationships in resolutely nontheistic traditions—defined by right actions and compassion—could be seen as right relationships to God (acting in accord with God’s will), while those in resolutely nontheistic traditions could view those in theistic traditions—again by virtue of their right actions and compassion—as being in a right relationship to the way to enlightenment or to Buddhahood, or to Brahman, or to the *dharmakāya*. In this way it is open to those in the Abrahamic traditions, and to those in the resolutely nontheistic traditions, to recognize each other’s religious traditions as right by virtue of providing a right relationship to religious reality, even though the theistic and nontheistic conceptions of religious reality are incompatible. This mutual recognition

19. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 36. Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987), 153–55. Hick cites Ward’s discussion of this transformation.

would not make Buddhists Christians or make Christians Buddhist, as it would not make *advaitist* Hindus Muslims or Muslims *advaitist* Hindus, just as Christians and Jews recognizing that they have faith in the one God does not make Christians Jews or Jews Christians. This mutual recognition, though, does allow omega-acceptance by those in the Abrahamic theistic traditions and those in nontheistic traditions of each other's religious traditions. And it would do so while permitting individuals to have alpha-commitment to their own religious tradition, for the omega-acceptance of other religious traditions by virtue of their allowing a right relationship to religious reality does not require a religious person to regard the core beliefs of her of his religion as anything less than certain in their truth.

Summary

Summing up, it is possible for those in theistic traditions to see those in other theistic traditions as rightly related to God by virtue of their faith in God; it is possible for those in theistic and nearly theistic traditions to see others in theistic or nearly theistic traditions as rightly related to religious reality by virtue of their hope in or devotion to a divine figure, a Buddha or a *bodhisattva*; and it is possible for those in all the major religious traditions, including theistic and resolutely nontheistic traditions, to see others in all other major traditions as rightly related to religious reality by virtue of right action and compassion. In this way it is possible for those in the major religious traditions or world religions to see all the world religions as right—which is to have omega-acceptance. At the same time one in any of the traditions of the East or West, whether it be a Buddhist or a Hindu or any of the Abrahamic traditions, can without tension have alpha-commitment to one's own religious tradition.