

# Introduction

Influenced by the theory of evolution and organic growth, English theologian and poet John Henry Newman (1801–90) was forced to rethink his concept of the Church and his understanding of history. The result of this reflection was his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, a work wherein Newman supports an organic evolutionary theory of doctrinal development. Further, Newman deliberates Christianity's ability to assimilate ideas and practices from other religious traditions without sacrificing pre-existing truths and goodness. He believes that all religious systems possess some universal subject matter, i.e. the human search for truth and enlightenment. Christianity was influenced by the philosophies of the Greek and Roman world, which asked the same questions and advocated many of the same truths. Christianity, because of its continuity and the firmness of its principles, has succeeded in assimilating ideas that other religions find incompatible with their own traditions.

Like many other world religions, Christianity is not static, but subject to continuous change, according to certain forces within human society and the needs of its believers. The Christian religion evolves in progressive stages, manifesting the life of God in humanity. In short, Christianity is an evolutionary faith. The religious life proceeds in sequences, from simple to more complex and higher forms, in its institutions, spiritual life, doctrines, and practices. It manifests God in history and, in the person of Jesus Christ, has made and continues to make a deep and far-reaching impact on the moral life of humanity in the past, the present and the future.

Viewing religion as essentially historical and God as the self-unfolding *absolute spirit* and the object of philosophical inquiry, the German philosopher G.W. Hegel (1770–1831) was able to integrate his transcendental philosophy with the emergence of social, political,

and legal institutions. Hegel defined religion as ‘the standpoint of the consciousness of the true ... of the universal, of the absolutely self-determining true that has being in and for itself’.<sup>2</sup> He held that the most important element in religion is the doctrine and its concern for the truth, and not any subjective and irrational feeling or experience. The truth of religion depends on how it can change human beings’ moral or ethical behaviour for the better. For Hegel, Christianity is closest to the absolute truth. Unfortunately, he had no interest in non-Christian faiths. In spite of this missing piece, his stress on the *Geist*, the Spirit, which develops in the course of history, is insightful and universal. We have witnessed how the spirit of Christianity has transformed the West’s social, political and legal institutions.

Another significant contribution of Hegel was his dialectical method, which had a great influence on Karl Marx. Dialectic is a method of philosophical debate which involves presenting contradictory positions between opposites: back-and-forth dialogue. Hegelian dialectic is an interpretive method that relates specific entities to an absolute idea; a thesis is proposed followed by an anti-thesis (contrary position) and reconciled at a higher level of truth known as a synthesis.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel’s dialectical method consists of three moments that can be applied to any concept or anything that is true in general. The first moment of this dialectical method is ‘understanding’ and ‘the moment of fixity, in which concepts or forms have a seemingly stable definition or determination’. The second is the moment of ‘instability’, ‘a one-sidedness or restrictedness’, which is the antithesis of the first moment, known as the *sublate*, cancelling, negating, and preserving at the same time. The third moment is ‘speculative’ or ‘positively rational’. Once we grasp the unity of the two opposites, i.e. the first and second moment, we arrive at the third moment with a positive result. Hegel’s dialectic does not require new ideas to show up. The nature of the earlier determinations drives the movement from one to another and thus ‘comes to its own accord’. For Hegel, this movement

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<sup>2</sup> G.W. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, 1: Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, edited by Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 205. See also Clement Wayne Hudson, ‘The Enlightenment Critique of “Religion”’, *Australian E-Journal of Theology* 5, no. 1 (2005): pp. 1–12.

<sup>3</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ‘Hegel’s Dialectics’, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-dialectics/#HegeDescHisDialMeth>.

is driven by necessity or ‘logic’, which is the hallmark of Western thought.<sup>4</sup> It is within this dialectical framework that I have composed the following chapters.

This book was conceived as a textbook or reference for undergraduate students in religious studies, seminarians in preparation for the priesthood, or any reader interested in deeper reflection. Hence I have added questions for discussion at the end of each chapter. Topics such as religious commitment and tolerance, attitude towards other religions, sociological aspects of religion, interreligious dialogue, syncretism, and dual religious citizenship, are examined critically.

This text first deals with the relationship between monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs, identifying their functions and philosophical backgrounds. In the course of exploring the history of the Church, this review also examines the dialectic tension between tolerance and intolerance. Generally speaking, we are more prone to be intolerant when we are the majority. The discourse also attempts to present a more comprehensive view of syncretism from a historical context and its translation into multiple religious traditions in Asian societies. This is followed by a chapter deliberating religion from a sociological perspective, focusing on the works of Marx, Engels, Durkheim, and Weber.

An important topic regarding the future of religion is secularism. Here, we focus on the dialogue between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger in *The Dialectics of Secularization*. Related to secularism is the rise of religious pluralism, where non-Christian religions flourish. In the West, Eastern philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism seem to be enjoying a revival while Christianity is retreating.

With the arrival of more immigrants into the United Kingdom and other countries in Europe, we witness the growth of other faiths and the fading of Christianity as the dominant religion. Most of the immigrants that arrive on the shores of Europe come from non-Christian countries, shaping their host societies to become more pluralistic and multicultural, a change that comes together with advantages and disadvantages. Immigrants have contributed much to the economic progress of many Western societies as new arrivals often take up jobs that locals shun. At the same time, Western Europe has moved from a secular to a more pluralistic society.

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<sup>4</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ‘Hegel’s Dialectics’, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-dialectics/#HegeDescHisDialMeth>.

Some of these immigrants hold values concerning sex, marriage, religious beliefs, and customs that are vastly at odds with Western culture and norms, thus creating conflicts and friction. Bigotry is still prevalent in the West where division according to racial, ethnic, and cultural differences has deepened lately. For example, the recent Black Lives Matter protests reached their climax on 6 June 2020, when half a million people turned out all over the United States to protest peacefully and, at times, violently.

Furthermore, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, racism against Asians has increased in the United States, Europe, and Australia. Anti-China sentiments have been transformed into bigotry and racial prejudice. Arguably, jealousy and envy of China's rapid economic and technological progress, which is perceived to be threatening the hegemony of the West, have increased rapidly. Chinese communities in different parts of the world have mobilised themselves to raise awareness of these anti-China sentiments.

Unless society addresses these urgent issues and problems, there is a risk of communal violence and suppression of freedom of expression. If and when this happens, it would undermine democracy and threaten our hard-won liberty, solidarity, and equality, as we turn into a society dominated by fear, prejudice, and bigotry.

Western society has been enriched by freedom, democracy, economic prosperity, and scientific and technological advancement. Underpinning this is reason, associated with the rational thinking emphasized by Plato and Aristotle. However, the understanding of reason as an aspect of the divine logos that is generative and creative has been rejected. Instead, many uphold the notion of reason as associated with economic and material progress, while religious faith has been superseded by the 'enlightenment of reason'.<sup>5</sup> Once we separate reason from faith, there are adverse, even dire, consequences. We must return to a basis for our universal values, which our religious tradition has provided in the past. This includes the emphasis on human rights and dignity with its roots in Judeo-Christian tradition, teaching us that human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

The late Swiss Roman Catholic priest and theologian Hans Küng urged Christians and non-Christians to embrace universal humanity as a means to integrate our faith and values; uphold the equal rights,

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<sup>5</sup>. Mary Frances McKenna, 'A Consideration of Christianity's Role in a Pluralistic Society', *The Way* 55, no. 4 (October 2016), pp. 35–6.

dignity, and value of each person; and at the same time, acknowledge our differences and responsibilities. Our society needs to create a space whereby our differences can be discussed and truth and goodness can be upheld through dialogue. This enables us to move beyond a pluralism that is merely pragmatic and influenced solely by economic expediency. A global ethic, such as the one promoted by Küng, is urgently needed to save our planet and ourselves from self-destruction.

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