

Kierkegaard and Hegel on Abraham:  
The Openness and Complexity of the Modern Context

In the previous chapter I suggested that there were three key, inter-related dimensions constitutive of contemporary theological remedies of Christian faith for the sake of the Jewish neighbor that are importantly related to the wider context of contemporary analysis of the problem of Christian faith more generally: the nature of imperialistic discourse, the relation of particularity to universality, and the relation of concrete religious faith to the ethical. In this chapter I give a reading of the contest between Kierkegaard and Hegel, as staged in *Fear and Trembling*, to demonstrate the extent to which these inter-related dimensions emerge and function within the deeper context of modernity's foundational struggle with the particularity of Abraham and the nature of religious faith. The imperialistic logic of what I am calling the sectarian-particular is fleshed out, as is its essential connection to Abraham in the theological, ethical, and philosophical imagination of the modern West. The goal of the chapter is to lay the ground by which the reader will more readily recognize the extent to which contemporary analyses of the problem of Christian faith for the Jewish neighbor—mine included—are pursued within the territory staked out in the contest between Kierkegaard and Hegel and follow its distinctive geography. It should also begin to emerge how this modern context determines contemporary analyses of the particular problem of Christian faith and the Jewish neighbor precisely to the extent to which

the context itself emerges as a consequence of—and so as determined by—this very problem in its irreducible particularity.

I first attempt to bring out the complexity beneath the deceptive and powerful simplicity of Kierkegaard's language of Abrahamic faith as "breach" of the ethical. The either/or between seemingly mutually exclusive alternatives this simple language sets before the reader is *not* between faith, on the one hand, and ethical obligation, on the other, but between *two understandings of faith* in its *relation* to the ethical: the Abrahamic (Kierkegaard could also say, "New Testament Christianity," here) and the Hegelian. I then show how this "breach of the ethical" is fundamentally structured as an imperialistic violence to the neighbor when seen through the lens of Hegelian assumptions. Finally, I briefly show that a certain understanding of the relation of particularity to universality is fundamental to these assumptions by which the faith of Abraham is polemically condemned and superseded.

In closing, I note that, as compelling as Hegel's critique of Abraham strikes our contemporary ears and hearts, Kierkegaard's reading keeps open the unexpected possibility that Hegel might actually have it wrong. Hegel may be engaged in a certain kind of imperialistic discourse himself, and one that casts its own specific shadow over the children of Abraham. The chapter ends, then, with an ironic rub for contemporary remedies of Christian faith for the sake of the Jewish neighbor funded by modern assumptions expressed by Hegel—assumptions with regard to faith and the ethical, the universal and the particular, and the status of Abraham as the father of imperialistic religious "genius." As a result, the Kierkegaardian either/or between two understandings of faith in relation to the ethical can be seen as pertaining between two forms—or, as I will argue, three forms—of interpretive imperialism with their own variously problematic shadows in relation to the children of Abraham. The ultimate goal of the chapter in relation to the argument that follows is to suggest that this either/or—the existence of live alternatives—is still in play, to the extent that modernity is not a settled context in which the problem of Abraham has been overcome and interpretive imperialism dispensed with. It is a context that is open and contested, postmodern and post-colonial discourse notwithstanding.

## THE EITHER/OR: TWO UNDERSTANDINGS OF FAITH (AND THE ETHICAL)

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard has Johannes de Silentio describe the faith of Abraham, as it is expressed in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's command, variously as a breach of the ethical, as outside the ethical, as a contradiction of the ethical, and most famously, as a teleological suspension of the ethical—mutually exclusive alternatives, all. However, to appreciate what Kierkegaard is up to, one must not simply take this oppositional language at face value. To probe more deeply into what Kierkegaard's either/or actually involves, then, we will first look at Hegel's assumptions with regard to the ethical. There are two consistent, interrelated refrains in *Fear and Trembling* regarding the Hegelian conception of the ethical: the ethical is the highest and the ethical is the universal. We will consider the consequences of the first assertion, here, and come back to the latter toward the end of the chapter.

First, the ethical is the highest. The characterization of the ethical as the highest signifies the extent to which there is neither something higher than, nor outside of, the ethical itself, of the totality of relations constituting the concrete whole of one's social (or, national—today we might say, global) world. In the words of Johannes, the ethical "rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* but is itself the *telos* for everything outside, and when that is taken up into it, it has no further to go."<sup>1</sup> The ethical, having its *telos* within itself, is self-sustaining and self-justifying. "The whole of human existence is . . . entirely self-enclosed, as a sphere, and the ethical is at once the limit and completion . . . fill[ing] all existence."<sup>2</sup> In the words of Levinas's critique of Hegel's conception of history, the ethical conceived as the highest constitutes "a universal order which maintains itself and justifies itself all by itself."<sup>3</sup>

Now what does this concept of the ethical mean for an understanding of religious faith? In as much as the Hegelian ethical is the highest (and the universal), Johannes says it "fills all existence" as the totality of

1. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 83.

2. *Ibid.*, 95.

3. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 87. This critique has three main targets, Hegel's concept of History, the role of the subject in Husserl's phenomenology, and Heidegger's concept of Being. Levinas sees each of these as resulting, each in its own way, in an "imperialism of the same" (85) in relation to the other.

relations. There is nothing outside of this relation that cannot be reduced to or remain in opposition to it, “except in the sense of what is evil.”<sup>4</sup> He goes so far as to insist that, for Hegel, “the ethical is the divine.”<sup>5</sup> The ethical constitutes the very end (*telos*) and content of the individual’s relationship to God. There is no relation to God outside of—or higher than—the ethical, for the ethical itself is the highest. Consequently, the individual is properly related to God when properly and rationally related to the ethical whole, the totality of ethical relations. As Hannay points out, there is simply “no duty to God that could not be found among those obligations.”<sup>6</sup>

The key point with regard to religious faith, then? On Hegel’s terms: the conception of the ethical as the highest does not exclude or oppose faith, but constitutes an expression of what Hegel believes to be essential Christian truth. It entails a specific understanding of the nature of faith as properly ordered to the ethical as its *telos* and proper content. Hegel understands the God-relation of faith to be fulfilled in one’s relation to one’s neighbor and, more specifically, in the totality of one’s ethical relations and duties. And here we can hear the echo of Rubenstein’s commitment to “human solidarity” as criteria and judge of religious faith.

All well and good. There is just one more dimension of the ethical as the highest that needs mentioning before turning to Abraham. Johannes points out that, “within its own compass the ethical has several rankings.”<sup>7</sup> The individual, as the particular, is related to the whole at ascending levels of more and more comprehensive wholes, e.g., the family, the city, the state, and ultimately, for Hegel, Western civilization’s (and indeed, the World Spirit’s) pinnacle achievement, modern protestant culture. Therefore, it is possible that a suspension of one’s ethical obligation on a lower level, say the level of family obligation, may be justified, indeed, demanded, if it serves a higher level of the larger whole. This kind of suspension of the ethical would not be a *breach*, but rather, a tragic *fulfillment* of the ethical. Johannes gives a classic example. An entire nation suffers under a divine wrath. The deity demands a young girl as a sacrifice. In such a context, “it is with heroism that the father has to

4. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 96, 84.

5. *Ibid.*, 89.

6. Hannay, “Introduction,” 29.

7. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 86.

make that sacrifice,” and “never a noble soul in the world will there be but sheds tears of sympathy for their pain, tears of admiration for their deed.”<sup>8</sup> The sacrifice of a particular ethical obligation at the family level, if for the good of the wider community, is an expression, not a breach, of the ethical.

Not so with Abraham. His particular relation to Isaac, ethically speaking, is the inviolate love of father to son. Johannes notes that, within the Hegelian ethical, it may be possible to “justify him ethically for suspending the ethical duty to the son” (in his decision to sacrifice Isaac), if thereby he did not exceed “the ethical’s own teleology,”<sup>9</sup> that is, if his action had served a higher ethical purpose or goal for the wider community. However, this is clearly not the case. Abraham’s decision to suspend his ethical duty to his son by sacrificing him, in obedience to God, cannot be understood to serve or express a higher ethical good. “It is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the State, that Abraham did it, not to appease angry gods.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, from the Hegelian point of view, Abraham’s breach of the ethical was not only due to the fact that he suspended his particular ethical duty to his son, but that he suspended the ethical itself. “In his action he overstepped the ethical altogether, and had a higher *telos* outside it [his own particular God-relation], in relation to which he suspended it (the ethical as *telos*).”<sup>11</sup> Abraham behaves as if God, and his particular relation to God (the dimension of the particular and the universal is anticipated here), are absolutely distinct from and higher than the ethical, and are thereby absolutely determinative of the ethical and the totality of relations therein. How does Abraham’s decision of faith, then, place him in relation to the ethical as conceived by Hegel? He stands outside the ethical, in breach of it, and in contradiction to it.<sup>12</sup>

8. Ibid., 86, 87. Kierkegaard has Johannes repeatedly stress the extent to which the ethical-universal, as opposed to the paradox of faith, is constituted by the ability to be *understood*. As Hannay notes, Hegel’s conception of the ethical is marked by the possibility of being understood through “sharable thoughts” of “common language” that “suffice for people to describe and justify their actions and attitudes to one another” (Hannay, “Introduction,” 10–11). This is the persistent thorn in Johannes’s side in relation to Abraham; he cannot understand him. The way in which Abraham constitutes an un-subsumable surd calling into question the adequacy of a “common language” by which faith can be understood foreshadows the “postmodern” nature of the argument.

9. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 86.

10. Ibid., 88

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 90. At issue here, in the relation of Kierkegaard to Hegel, are diametrically

So, while Hegel's conception of the ethical entails an affirmation of faith (when the latter is properly understood), it would seem Abraham's faith entails a stark rejection of the ethical. And in doing so, it constitutes a grotesque disfiguration of the true nature of faith itself. That is, if we take Hegel's word for it. But what if we take our cue from Abraham, or more accurately, from the confession that Abraham is the father of faith, rather than its most horrific profaner? What if we allow that confession about Abraham to determine our understanding of how his troubling decision is related to the ethical? This is precisely what Johannes tries to do, and what causes him so much trouble, given his initial willingness to give Hegel the benefit of the doubt with regard to the nature of the ethical.

Most people assume that the act of Abraham's faith atop Mount Moriah consists in his willingness to give Isaac up for God. It is quite natural to assume so. It is, after all, what the available evidence suggests to the public eye of the neutral observer. However, according to Johannes's reading of the story, this is not faith at all. Giving up Isaac for God, Johannes argues, would make Abraham a "knight of resignation" rather than of faith (the knight of resignation being exemplified by the king sacrificing his daughter to the angry god to save the nation). The "knight of faith," on the other hand,

does exactly the same as the other knight [of resignation], he infinitely renounces the claim to the love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the marvel, he makes one more movement, more wonderful than anything else, for he says: "I nevertheless believe that I shall get her [for Abraham, Isaac], namely on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible."<sup>13</sup>

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opposed understandings of God and God's relation to the universal (conceived of as the ethical life of the societal whole, the world-historical). Whereas Hegel understands God to be in continuity with—indeed, within—the world-historical, Abraham stands in a relation to a God independent of and over against the societal whole and the world-historical. It is Hegel's understanding of God and the God-relation, i.e., of faith, that is the ultimate target of Kierkegaard's critique: "Where Hegel goes wrong . . . is in talking about faith." (84) However, Hegel's misconception of faith, from Kierkegaard's point of view, is clearly related to distortions in Hegel's assumptions regarding the ethical. A "new category" (88) for genuine faith, then, would have transformative consequences for a conception of the ethical.

13. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 73. The brackets are mine.

What makes Abraham a hero of faith is not his willingness to give up Isaac. Rather, Johannes understands his special greatness to lie in the fact that “he did not doubt that he would get Isaac back . . . that God both wants and will be able to give him [Abraham] back his opportunity to exercise paternal love.”<sup>14</sup> Not only did Abraham expect to get Isaac back—“through faith Abraham did not renounce his claim on Isaac, through his faith he received Isaac”—he expected, in getting Isaac back, *to get the ethical itself back*.<sup>15</sup> The faith of Abraham, then, is a double movement. A giving up and a getting back. What is distinctive—and Kierkegaard, or at least Johannes, would say, great—about Abraham’s faith is not his willingness to give up the ethical, but his commitment to hold fast to the ethical, beyond resignation, that is, on impossible grounds—on grounds beyond the totality of the ethical itself: “for it is great to grasp hold of the eternal but greater to stick to the temporal after having given it up.”<sup>16</sup> Abraham’s decision to sacrifice Isaac is a decision of *faith* precisely to the extent that it is *not* a decision to give up either Isaac or the ethical. Johannes invites the reader to share his wonder at the fact that Abraham never ceases to hold to Isaac and to the ethical, by holding to God’s promise and possibility concerning him, even as he raises the knife.

The extent to which the faith of Abraham entails a distinctive embrace of the ethical within the very decision to sacrifice Isaac is further illustrated in the accompanying sketch of the “happy burgher,” a sketch of how a contemporary knight of faith—presumably, a modern-day Abraham—might appear in nineteenth century Copenhagen. On the surface, this knight of faith bears very little resemblance to Abraham. The figure he does resemble, however, with “remarkable similarity,” is “the *bourgeois philistine*” (a middle class, decidedly non-intellectual and non-spiritual, businessman).<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, there are no abhorrent breaches of ethical responsibility such as child sacrifice and the like visible here. Indeed, the “extremity” of Abraham’s ordeal is nowhere to be seen.

He looks like a tax gatherer. . . . He is solid through and through.  
His stance? Vigorous, it belongs altogether to finitude, no smartly  
turned-out townsman taking a stroll out to Fresberg on a Sunday

14. Hannay, “Introduction,” 14, 19.

15. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 77.

16. *Ibid.*, 52.

17. *Ibid.*, 67.

afternoon treads the ground with surer foot; he belongs altogether to the world, no *petit bourgeois* belongs to it more. . . . No heavenly glance or any other sign of the incommensurable betrays him; if one didn't know him it would be impossible to set him apart from the rest of the crowd.<sup>18</sup>

One can only marvel at this startling identification of two such starkly contradictory scenes: Abraham ascending Moriah and a contented *petit bourgeois* walking through the park. If one recalls the opening of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes gives a series of differing versions of the trip to Moriah, his own versions that attempt to present an Abraham he could understand—versions that included a glimpse of a grimace of anger, a wince of pain, a clenched fist, the fallen countenance of resignation or despair. But none of these, in Johannes's reading, are given in the biblical story, not a hint of understandable human response to such a horrible task. It is as if Abraham on his way to Moriah is indeed indistinguishable—to the neutral observer—from a well-fed merchant on the way to market. And this *incognito* is no doubt a clue to the nature of Abrahamic faith about which Johannes can only wonder (and tremble). But clue or not, one is apt to take offense here at the seeming trivialization of the horror of Abraham's act, and especially what it meant for Isaac. Yet there is more to the modern day Abraham than meets the eye.

The happy burgher is indistinguishable from the crowd, and yet, Johannes continues, "he purchases every moment he lives . . . at the dearest price; not the least thing does he do except on the strength of the absurd."<sup>19</sup> Johannes insists that he is essentially akin to Abraham after all. His open-armed, full-blooded relation to the ethical whole of the creaturely realm, his being at home in the world, is at every moment the invisible double movement of faith.

He drains in infinite resignation the deep sorrow of existence . . . he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, whatever is most precious in the world [Isaac!], and yet to him finitude tastes just as good as to one who has never known anything higher . . . the earthly form he presents is a new creation on the strength of the absurd.<sup>20</sup>

18. Ibid., 68. My emphasis.

19. Ibid., 69.

20. Ibid., 69–70. The brackets are mine.



In light of Johannes's description of the happy burgher as a knight of faith, the meaning of the sacrifice of Isaac as an illustration of the nature of faith demands radical reconsideration. Stephen Crites's observations are enlightening in this regard.

But faith, after negating the finite . . . negates as well the infinitude that stands opposed to it, and so embraces again the things of this world. On different terms, however: For now earthly things are no longer . . . self-explanatory . . . simply given in the nature of things . . . the earthly things faith now embraces it receives as miraculous gifts fresh from the hand of God. . . . Faith realizes existentially what it means to live, not in a self-contained cosmos, but in creation.<sup>21</sup>

When the story of Abraham and the happy burgher of Copenhagen are read together, the sacrifice of faith takes on the nature of a radicalized relation to the finite world, and the persons and things within it, that gives up the status and authority of the ethical *as such and in its own right*, and whole-heartedly embraces it rather as a gift from God, which is understood to be *its proper basis*. Faith is not a sacrifice (giving up) of the neighbor, but a receiving and embracing of the neighbor on their proper basis, as a gift from God.

Again, then, the key point with regard to faith? On Abraham's terms: Abraham's decision of faith is not a breach or rejection of the ethical, but rather an affirming yet displacing embrace of the ethical *on the grounds of faith*—understood as the distinctive and particular relation to God. In the faith of Abraham, “the ethical is reduced to the relative.” And Johannes is quick to add, “it doesn't follow . . . that the ethical is to be done away with. Only that it gets quite a different expression.”<sup>22</sup> Abraham's decision of faith only appears as a breach of the ethical if one assumes that, in the Hegelian (and as we shall see, modern in a more general sense) understanding of faith, the ethical is the highest in relation to faith. But if

21. Crites, *Twilight*, 75. Similarly, Hannay suggests that what the sacrifice in this story symbolizes is the extent to which Abraham was willing and able to “accept that human life, Isaac's, Abraham's, everyone's, acquires its meaning and value from the source of creation itself, not from the . . . forces of creation that confront a person and bear him along in the world” (Hannay, “Introduction,” 14). My own suggestion is that it may be interesting, and perhaps even edifying, to reflect on the figure and meaning of Christian baptism here, as symbolic of precisely this Abrahamic double-movement of faith—giving one's life away (dying) to receive it back from the hand of God (rising to new life).

22. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 98.

Abraham is taken as determinative of the nature of faith then it is faith that is the highest, and the ethical is not rejected, but is wholly embraced, albeit as relative to faith.

One of Kierkegaard's tricks in his reading of Hegel, then, is to overturn the Hegelian supersessionist movement of "going further" than Abrahamic faith by which the particularity of faith is embraced, superseded and given its true content and meaning from the higher, universal standpoint of the ethical. And in the reading of Barth that follows we will find that this overturned supersessionist structure of affirmation and displacement, by which the ethical is embraced on grounds other than its own, that is, on the impossible grounds of faith, is remarkably similar to the riskily supersessionist structure of an evangelical Christian faith's embrace of Abraham and the Jewish neighbor. As the argument goes on to show, there seems to be enough supersessionism here for everyone. And consequently, the remedy does not easily—or ever—escape the poison (at least as far as what is humanly possible).

If one looks closely, then, at the contest between Kierkegaard and Hegel as it is staged in *Fear and Trembling*, it is clear that what is at issue is *not* an either/or decision between faith and the ethical. Rather, the issue is an either/or decision between *two understandings of faith*, in its relation to the ethical. One understanding sees the God-relation of faith as "the highest," and as such, the proper ground of the ethical. I am calling this an understanding of faith that takes Abraham as a model. Such an understanding of faith has several distinctive elements. The first two are structural.

1. The God to whom one is in relation in faith is absolutely distinguishable from creation and humanity and, as such, is "over all." Consequently, the relation of faith to God is absolutely distinguishable from all relations to creation and humanity.
2. The relation of faith to God is held to be absolutely prior and binding, determining the nature and status of all relations to creation and humanity.
3. The third element is substantive, dealing with singular content: the God to whom one is in relation in faith is the God *of Abraham*,

a God who embarks upon a determinate, particular history with this determinate, particular people, through which God works to bless all people and all of creation. This is the God who chooses to bless all the nations through the concrete history of one tribal community, the God who promised Isaac to Abraham.

And this is where things get tricky. The “absolutes” of the first two structural elements—absolutely distinguishable, absolutely prior—are complicated and seemingly compromised by the third, substantive element. For the God (and the God-relation) that is absolutely distinct from all historical relations of the ethical is a God who unaccountably chooses to be in relation to us—to *all* of history—by entering history and the historical relations of the ethical in a very particular way. For Christian faith, this particular way is the *incognito* of a particular human person amidst a particular people. So, how to distinguish the absolute God-relation from all other, creaturely relations if the former does indeed occur in the midst of the latter? How to distinguish the knight of faith from the *petit bourgeois*? How to distinguish Abraham from a murderer?<sup>23</sup>

Leaving these troubling questions for the moment, I suggest that a *Christian* faith taking Abraham as a model would most likely entail a particular, historically contingent, kerygmatic confession, e.g., that the God of Israel has acted decisively for all the nations in the particular person and work of Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, the promised Messiah of the Jewish people and the risen Lord of all creation.<sup>24</sup> And this particular faith-relation, to this particular God as witnessed to in this confession,

23. Pertinent here is the relation in Kierkegaard's thinking between the incognito of Abraham and the happy burgher as both knights of faith (indistinguishable to the neutral observer from a murderer and a bourgeois philistine, respectively) and that of the career of Jesus of Nazareth as God incarnate in time (for example, in *Philosophical Fragments*). Also pertinent for our central problem is the extent to which, given a certain incognito, faith leaves any discernible marks or traces in the concrete world by which it might be recognized and distinguished from unjustifiable violences. Kierkegaard may allow for such marks and traces, despite the incognito. For instance: 1. Faith is based on the determinate *content* of the promise of God. 2. A knight of faith never takes disciples. 3. A knight of faith is a witness and never a teacher. On Kierkegaard's terms, then, it would be perfectly appropriate, indeed, mandatory, to make an unambiguous and adamant distinction between a knight of faith and, say, a Jim Jones, or, closer to our concerns, a Nazi clergyperson of the German Evangelical Church.

24. I am following Kendall Soulen in this particular phrasing. See, Soulen, *God of Israel*.

would be understood as absolutely (though, given the above, complicatedly) distinguishable from all other creaturely relations. As such, it would determine the nature, status, and meaning of all other, creaturely relations. More specifically, it would determine the Church's understanding of and relation to the world and to the neighbor, including the Jewish neighbor. Consequently, it is no wild stretch of imagination to suggest that the theology of Karl Barth might come to mind as a contemporary example of an understanding of Christian faith that takes Abraham as a model. I will, in fact, make this very suggestion, and attempt to make good on it in the following two chapters.

The other understanding of the nature of faith that takes shape within the contest between Kierkegaard and Hegel sees the ethical as the highest, and as such, as the highest expression and truest meaning, indeed the entire substance, of faith itself. It is assumed that only within the sphere of the ethical can we best understand the proper nature, status, and meaning of the God-relation of faith. Taking our cue from Kierkegaard's mischievous characterization of Hegelian Christianity as "going further" than Abraham, we can say that this is a Christian faith that takes the supersession of Abraham as a model. I will suggest that the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, as representative of many critical remedies of Christian faith for the sake of the Jewish neighbor ("leaving room" for the children of Abraham by "going further" than Abraham), constitutes a contemporary example of this understanding of faith.

I am clearly up to a bit of mischief myself here in this choice of language. As I noted in the previous chapter, the Christian tradition of supersessionism—the supersession of Abraham and Israel by the Church in God's economy of salvation—is considered a prime expression of that logic (interpretive imperialism) inherent in traditional Christian faith and theology that contemporary Christian theologians understand to be ethically problematic in relation to the Jewish neighbor. It is a rather obvious trick, then, for me to employ the language for the traditional problem in my characterization of the contemporary theological remedies of that very problem. However, I am not simply trying to be clever or mischievous. While perhaps an obvious rhetorical ploy on my part, I believe it is just as obvious to an attentive assessment of both the modern assumptions regarding faith and the ethical represented here by Hegel, and certain contemporary remedies of Christian faith for the sake of the Jewish neighbor, that what we are in fact dealing with is precisely a super-

session of Abraham; the remedy of traditional supersessionism is accomplished by means of another kind of supersessionism. My employment of the language of supersession here is not, then, merely pithy, but finds its mark; it reveals a certain self-contradiction that does indeed complicate the prognosis of the administered remedy. This case remains to be made in later chapters. It is, however, given some provisional footing in the following consideration of the nature of the ethical breach enacted by the faith of Abraham (a breach, that is, according to Johannes's rendering of the Hegelian view of the ethical as the highest in relation to faith).

### ABRAHAM'S "BREACH OF THE ETHICAL" AS IMPERIALISTIC VIOLENCE

While we find ourselves confronted with an either/or between two understandings of faith in the pages of *Fear and Trembling*, it is important to note that these two understandings do not stand side by side in an arbitrary and benign relationship. It is not the case that one is left to choose between them as if they were equally viable possibilities, choosing according to the tastes of personal religious preference or conviction, with no serious consequences attendant upon which option is chosen (this is, of course, what modernity longs to be the case: religious faith as benign choice of personal taste irrelevant to the public sphere). In *both* cases, the one understanding does not allow for a generally generous and respectful assessment of the alternative, and therefore of the decision for the alternative. Rather, each compels a decision in its favor to the necessary exclusion of the other as untenable. It is customary to identify the Abrahamic understanding of faith with this exclusionary logic of the either/or. However, this logic is characteristic of the Hegelian option as well, at least in relation to Abraham, or perhaps more accurately and more to the point, *only*—singularly—in relation to Abraham.

This exclusionary logic of the Hegelian either/or is already before us. The Hegelian understanding of faith essentially entails both a polemical judgment upon the faith that takes Abraham as a model, and a remedy that, in "going further" than Abraham, brings faith into its own proper truth. What is the problem with a Christian faith that takes Abraham as a model that Hegel should find it necessary to supersede it, or more accurately, to supersede Abraham, for the sake of remedying Christian faith? For Hegel, a faith that takes Abraham as a model inevitably puts

Isaac—the son, the brother, the neighbor, the ethical itself—under the knife. And therefore, in bringing faith into its own proper truth—by superseding Abraham—Hegel renders faith safe for the neighbor; he redeems faith from Abraham’s abusive patrilineage. He delivers faith from the dysfunctional and abusive house of Abraham.

Again, in Johannes’s reading of Hegel, there can be no God, as the *telos* of faith, which stands outside of and irreducibly distinct from the ethical. Within Hegel’s conception of the “self-enclosed” whole of human existence, “God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought.”<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard has Johannes wryly conclude that the love of God demonstrated by Abraham’s faith, the love of a God who stands outside and beyond the ethical, cannot but be “suspect, like the love referred to by Rousseau when he talks of a person’s loving the Kaffirs instead of his neighbor.”<sup>26</sup> The implication of this reference to Rousseau (other than Rousseau’s implied racism) is that the faith of Abraham constitutes a betrayal on every level of the interlocking complex of the ethical. Fidelity to a relation with something other than the neighbor and the totality of neighbor-relations—that is, fidelity to God—appears to constitute a fundamental betrayal of the neighbor. And even more, since Abraham’s suspension of the ethical obligation of father to son cannot be seen to serve a higher sphere of the whole, the Hegelian ethical can only conclude, *if it is consistent*, that Abraham is a murderer.<sup>27</sup> The echo of Rubenstein’s question about the logic of Christian faith that requires the murder of Jews should ring uncomfortably in our ears at this point. And the prescient reader will demand to know what I am up to? In anticipating how the argument will unfold, the reader has good reason to ask if this is a perverse joke—holding Abraham ultimately responsible for the killing of the children of Abraham at the hands of the Church. It may be perverse, but it is no joke. And it is not of my own making. It is a perversity entailed in the modern understanding of religious faith and the ethical. The horror of Abraham for such an understanding is precisely that he is a killer of his

25. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 98.

26. *Ibid.*, 96.

27. Kierkegaard not only suggests that Hegelian Christianity is unable to do justice to the reality of Abraham’s faith (and, for Kierkegaard, true Christian faith), but sarcastically chides its lack of consistency in continuing to praise Abraham as the hero and father of faith when in fact it can only conclude, if it is consistent, that he is a murderer to be abhorred.

own child. Again, the disturbing pertinence of the title of Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide* comes into view here.

Kierkegaard makes explicit here a fundamental aspect of Enlightenment modernity's objection to traditional religious faith that is often overlooked. He dramatizes in a powerful way the extent to which the offense of traditional faith for the modern age was never simply faith's opposition to, or difference from, Reason. In the wake of the Enlightenment, traditional religious faith was not only denigrated as absurd and rationally abhorrent, it was castigated as dangerous and ethically abhorrent. And the Hegelian understanding of faith presented by Johannes stands firmly in this tradition. It entails an uncompromising ethical condemnation, indeed, a criminalization of the faith of Abraham.

The particular criminal logic of Abrahamic faith that Hegel finds objectionable—that puts Isaac under the knife, that is inherently dangerous for the neighbor—is, in contemporary parlance, the logic of imperialistic violation of the other as described by Edward Said (and as we shall see, Levinas and Derrida). Said's characterization of Orientalism as an imperialistic discourse of cultural and material domination serves as a key for translating Hegel's "modern ethical desire" into contemporary categories, enabling a certain shock of recognition with regard to our own so-called postmodern and post-colonial ethical instincts. For example, the phenomenon of a "nexus of knowledge and power" in which the other is, "in a sense, obliterated . . . as a human being" can certainly be taken as an apt description of what is going on in Abraham's relationship to Isaac.<sup>28</sup> Consider: in the biblical story of Mount Moriah (and Johannes's reading of it), Isaac appears to be a silent, represented object serving the interests of Abraham's own relationship with God. When the assumptions of Abraham's faith are imposed upon Isaac as the truth of Isaac's own life, the reality of that life is reduced to that of an object to be sacrificed for the sake of the reality and fidelity of Abraham's God-relation. To be so reduced seems awfully close to being, "in a sense, obliterated . . . as a human being." Indeed, not even "in a sense." For Isaac, it means the very material violation of being put under the knife.

And this appears to be just how the young Hegel understood those events on Mount Moriah. In his early theological writings, Hegel identifies Abraham as the origin of Jewish history, and his "spirit" as "the unity,

28. Said, *Orientalism*, 27.



the soul, regulating the entire fate” of that history. He then notes that “the first act which made Abraham the progenitor of a nation is a disavowance which snaps the bonds of communal life and love. The entirety of the relationships in which he had hitherto lived with men and nature, these beautiful relationships of his youth, he spurned.”<sup>29</sup> Inherent to the Abrahamic religious spirit, then, as Hegel sees it, is the breach of the communal and even familial relations of love. With this breach, Abraham isolates himself over against “the whole world,” which he then regards “as simply his opposite,” and as “sustained by . . . [a] God who was alien to it.”<sup>30</sup>

In Hegel’s reading, Abraham trades in communal and familial ties for an exclusive God-relation that transposes the reciprocal, loving nature of those former communal and familial relations into a register of mastery. “Nothing in nature was supposed to have any part in God; everything was simply under God’s mastery. . . . Moreover, it was through God alone that Abraham came in to a mediate relation with the world, the only link with the world possible for him.” Consequently,

mastery was the only possible relationship in which Abraham could stand to the infinite world opposed to him; but he was unable himself to make this mastery actual, and it therefore remained ceded to his Ideal [God—“the product of his thought”<sup>31</sup>]. He himself also stood under his Ideal’s dominion . . . he served the Idea, and so he enjoyed his Idea’s favor; and since its divinity was rooted in his contempt for the whole world, he remained its only favorite.”<sup>32</sup>

Hegel sees this combination of contempt for and breaching of all communal and familial relations in which Abraham opposes himself to the world, together with the way in which he is simultaneously sustained in that isolation by loyal servitude to his divine “thought-product,” as constituting an extremely toxic cocktail of interpretive imperialism. And this interpretive imperialism inevitably plays itself out in the most intimate relationship in Abraham’s life. In Hegel’s reading, “even the one love he had, his love for his son” was not spared the consequences of

29. Hegel, *On Christianity*, 182, 185.

30. *Ibid.*, 187.

31. *Ibid.*, 186.

32. *Ibid.*, 187–88.



Abraham's essential "spirit," a spirit of isolation from and contempt for all worldly relations mediated through absolute, privileged loyalty to an equally isolated divine Master. Abraham's natural intimacy with his son, Isaac, could not help but "trouble his all-exclusive heart . . . to the extent that even this love he once wished to destroy."<sup>33</sup> Even Abraham's love for his son must fall under the knife of Abraham's essential religious spirit, the spirit of mastery through exclusionary opposition and absolute religious servitude.

Hegel sees the essential hostility and exclusionary violence of Abraham's religious genius, then, as expressed paradigmatically in the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham imperialistically subjects all natural and communal relations, even his relation to Isaac, to his own exclusive relation to God. All creaturely others, and the natural familial and communal webs of inter-relation they entail, are interpreted by Abraham through the particular lens of his own all-encompassing God-relation. And it is this spirit, this distinctive, Abrahamic religious genius, that Hegel sees animating and determining the entirety of Jewish history.

For Hegel, the violent and exclusionary logic of Abraham's religious genius plays out in relation to the religious neighbor as well. Abraham's God-relation is unique for Hegel in that it *leaves no room* for the religious genius of any other people or nation, or for the gods that their religious genius would symbolically express.

Hence, Abraham's God is essentially different from . . . the national gods . . . a nation which reverences its national god has admittedly also isolated itself, partitioned what is unitary [i.e., human life], and shut others out of its god's share. But, while doing so, it has conceded the existence of other shares; instead of reserving the immeasurable to itself and banishing others from its sphere, it grants to others equal rights with itself; it recognizes . . . gods of others as . . . gods. On the other hand, in the jealous God of Abraham and his posterity there lay the horrible claim that He alone was God and that this nation was the only one to have a god.<sup>34</sup>

And as the family of Abraham becomes a nation, acquiring the requisite means and resources, and discovering itself to be in a position of power

33. Ibid., 187.

34. Ibid., 188. The brackets are mine.

in relation to its neighbors, Abraham's religious genius plays itself out in a very material, e.g., bloody way. The children of Abraham, possessed by his spirit, "exercised their dominion mercilessly with the most revolting and harshest tyranny, and utterly extirpated all life." For "outside" the relation to their god, which they assume to be the only God, outside that relation "in which nothing but they, the favorites, can share, everything is matter . . . a stuff, loveless, with no rights, something accursed which . . . they treat[ed] as accursed and then assign[ed] to its proper place [death] if it attempt[ed] to stir."<sup>35</sup>

Hegel's description of Abraham's religious genius as a coercive imposition of his own particular interpretation of divine and worldly reality upon the neighbor (be it Isaac or the surrounding religious communities) that thereby reduces the neighbor to a silent, lifeless object, resonates strongly with the kind of imperialistic violation of the integrity of the other described by Said. It would seem, then, that the young Hegel understands the breach of the ethical by Abrahamic faith in terms resonant with contemporary analysis and critique of imperialistic discourse.

A final point of irony. The young Hegel believed, as did Kant and others, that Christianity itself was among the victims of Abraham. There was a strong modern consensus in the wake of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism that the Christian religious spirit had been historically dominated by what was taken to be the foreign cultural symbols of an inherently violent Jewish religious genius, and that this cultural domination was at the heart of Christianity's own violent, imperialistic legacy. Christianity, especially in its earlier history, was seen to have mistaken the particular Jewish religious genius as the proper lens through which to read the universal ethical vision of Jesus' own, radically unique religious instinct (i.e., it mistakenly took Abraham as a model for faith). It thereby distorted Jesus' religious vision of the "brotherhood" of all peoples into an imperialistic discourse of mastery. Hegel (by no means alone here) saw this imperialistic grip of Abrahamic faith upon the spirit of Christianity as the cause of Germany's cultural impoverishment. His paradigmatic slogan of resistance against this cultural domination: "Is Judea, then, the Teutons' Fatherland?"<sup>36</sup> And for these moderns, Judea was no more the homeland of Jesus than it was for the Germanic peoples. Jesus was, in

35. Ibid. The brackets are mine.

36. Ibid., 145.

fact, taken to be closer kin to the modern German philosophical spirit than to Abraham and to Jesus' own Jewish contemporaries.



Let's review. Hegel's assumptions with regard to religious faith and the ethical can only characterize the internal logic of Abrahamic faith (as paradigmatically expressed in the sacrifice of Isaac) as a breach of the ethical. And it understands the nature of this breach to be essentially structured as an imperialistic—both interpretive and material—violation of the neighbor. Consequently, it seems clear that these assumptions do not allow for the possibility of a positive and respectful affirmation of Abrahamic faith as a viable alternative. There is no moment in which Abraham stands alongside Hegel, on a level playing field, as it were. He is simultaneously condemned and superseded as soon as Hegel (but as we shall see, not only Hegel) comes on the scene.

#### THE ETHICAL IS THE UNIVERSAL (AS CONTEXT FOR THE PARTICULAR)

And now we return briefly to the second consistent Hegelian refrain (according to Johannes) with regard to the ethical: the ethical is the universal. We have already seen hints of how the Hegelian concept of the universal represented in this context is rather distinctive. As the highest, Hegel understands the ethical to be the totality of creaturely relations constituting the communal *whole*. The universal, then, is not meant to signify a philosophically abstract category, as in the case, for example, of knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity), wherein that which is true is universally true, in the sense of being true for any person at any time and in any place. This abstract notion of universality characterized Hegel's early thought on the ethical, when he was still thinking largely under the influence of Kant. But the more mature work that Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* has in mind conceives of the universal in terms of the whole as opposed to the part, and as concerns the ethical, in terms of specifically concrete, historical wholes, such as a society or nation.<sup>37</sup>

37. Alistair Hannay unpacks this distinction nicely in his introduction to *Fear and Trembling*. See especially 15.

For Hegel, the ethical possibilities of the particular individual, in relation to both God and neighbor, can only be fully accounted for in terms of the universal, that is, in terms of the individual's proper and rational relation to, and place *within* the communal whole. Consequently, it is in placing oneself outside or above the communal whole, as Abraham does through his relation to God, that the particular individual transgresses the ethical. The imperialistic violence of Abraham's religious genius lies in the extent to which the God-relation of faith distorts the proper relation of the particular to the universal whole according to which the former is assumed to be relative to and subsumed within the latter.

Having here noted the distinctive concept of the universal—as the concrete communal whole—within the context of *Fear and Trembling*, my analysis in later chapters of the modern assumptions funding Ruether's theological remedy of Christian faith will look more broadly at various conceptions of the universal. We will find that the assumptions expressed here by Hegel with regard to the proper ordering of the particular to the whole, especially in relation to faith and the ethical, pertain to a variety of conceptions of the universal across the modern period, from Kant and Lessing to Hegel and Schleiermacher. As long as the particular is relative to the universal, any universal will do.

### CONCLUSION: WHAT IF HEGEL IS WRONG ABOUT THE ETHICAL?

The pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* has a nagging problem. While he initially admits assuming that Hegel is right about the ethical, the closer he looks at Abraham the more he finds himself driven to the conclusion that Hegel, or at least Hegelian Christianity, “is wrong in speaking about faith.”<sup>38</sup> The question raised for the reader, then, but not rigorously pursued in *Fear and Trembling* itself: if Hegel is wrong about faith, perhaps the assumption that he is right about the ethical needs to be revisited. In a wider reading of his works, it is clear that Kierkegaard assumes that this is indeed the case. Specifically, it is the subsuming of the particular within the context of the whole that constitutes a substantial ethical problem rather than being the very possibility of the ethical, as Hegel assumes. And this, on two levels.

38. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 54–55.

First, if the particular individual only understands themselves and the world from the comprehending perspective of the historical whole, then one is delivered from the ordeal of decision that besets one in “the confinement of a temporally situated angle of vision” when embedded *within* history. And it is this embeddedness—this rootedness in particularity and its predicament of radical finitude—that Kierkegaard assumes to be constitutive of both the human person and the ethical predicament. Crites puts it nicely. From the Hegelian standpoint of the universal whole, one “comprehends the abundance of human possibilities as a many-sided unity rather than as a field of mutually exclusive alternatives.”<sup>39</sup> The Absolute Knowledge of the Hegelian system, then, avoids, or stops short of Kierkegaard’s understanding of the ethical altogether, given that he understands the ethical—and the authentically human—precisely in terms of the inescapability of decision.

Second, Kierkegaard critiques Hegel’s subsuming of the particular individual within the universal whole as itself an unethical, imperialistic logic in relation to the particularity of the human person. He reverses the ordered relation of the particular to the universal. As Hannay observes, the truth of the particular individual for Kierkegaard can only be glimpsed as “independent of any specification one may give of what . . . is properly human *in general*.” The consequence being that, for Kierkegaard, “the universal becomes an expression . . . of a humanity pre-established, as it were, at the level of the particular and no longer the category *in which* humanity is established.”<sup>40</sup> The particular determines the universal, rather than *vice versa*. It is just this kind of commitment to particularity in resistance to what is seen as the imperialistic maw of the abstract, the general, and the universal (in Hegelian philosophy, for example), that is interpreted as a fundamentally ethical movement in much contemporary, postmodern, and post-colonial discourse. And, as it happens, this commitment to the particular is also a central thematic refrain of Barth’s theology. Consequently, the possibility of this reversal of fortunes between Hegel’s universal and Kierkegaard’s Abraham with regard to the ethical and the nature of imperialistic discourse foreshadows the possibility of a similar reversal—or at least complication—between contemporary attempts to purge Christian faith of its imperialistic dynamic in relation to

39. Crites, *Twilight of Christendom*, 104.

40. Hannay, “Introduction,” 30–31. My emphasis.

the Jewish neighbor and a certain evangelical inhabiting of that faith as exemplified by Barth's theological assumptions.



As I demonstrated briefly in the previous chapter, I am following the lead of Rubenstein, Ruether, and others in referencing Kierkegaard to frame what is at stake in the problem of Christian faith and the Church's ethical obligation to the Jewish neighbor. Where I take the road less traveled is in recognizing the extent to which the characterization of Christian faith as constituting a breach of ethical obligation is a characterization necessitated by certain modern—and in the context of a Kierkegaardian frame—Hegelian assumptions. And given that in our so-called post-modern context, Hegelian assumptions about anything have again been called into question, it seems reasonable to suspect that one of the first and most rigorous questioners of Hegel and modernity might provide some needed purchase on an alternative asking and answering of the question before us.

The openness and complexity of the context of modernity wherein the contest between Kierkegaard and Hegel with regard to faith, the ethical and Abraham appears to remain unsettled and in play constitutes the space in which the rest of this book unfolds. It is an openness and complexity that, to my mind, slips under the radar of leading theological work on this issue. My reading of this openness and complexity allows an account of the imperialistic bad news (according to Hegel . . . and Said) entailed in the Christian proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah and Lord, while also accounting for the imperialistic bad news (according to Kierkegaard . . . and Derrida) entailed in the modern West's remedy of that Christian faith. We are able to see that what is at issue in the diagnosis and remedy of Christian faith for the sake of the Jewish neighbor is an either/or between two kinds of imperialistic discourse (as in, two understandings of faith in relation to the ethical). There would seem to be no avoiding some risk of complicity in the bad news of interpretive and material violence to Jews within the histories of Christendom and the West more generally. The openness and complexity of the modern context, then, confronts us with a predicament in which—from the perspective of the ethical—it seems we can do no other than to choose our poison, for the sake of a possible remedy; we are confronted with alternative risks to be run, risks to be borne.