Although British theologian and analytic philosopher John Hick has contributed to several theological and philosophical disciplines, his pluralist hypothesis has been his most enduring and provocative contribution to the discourses of Christian theology and analytic philosophy. His rigorous case for philosophical pluralism establishes him as one of the most important thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century. He has arguably sustained what could be considered “the most compelling philosophical advocacy for religious pluralism ever written.”

His work is already treated as the “classic of its type,” and is a pioneering effort that has produced a mountain of response literature—polemical, critical and laudatory. Few are the theologians and philosophers who have entire books dedicated to their writings; even fewer still while they remain alive. Hick’s arguments for philosophical pluralism were so persuasive and provocative that during his lifetime many books were published in response entirely dedicated to further exploring the merits (or demerits) of his case. Although Hick saw himself as “only one


3 Terrence W. Tilley’s blurb, ibid.

of a number of theologians and philosophers who have independently developed a broadly pluralistic point of view,” the “sheer mass of literature that has already accumulated” around the issues he raises (not to mention the level of argumentative sophistication and wide reaching influence of his writings) testifies to his work’s role as the vanguard of “the rapidly developing pluralist perspective.”

Hick’s pluralist hypothesis is both a modern and a religious outlook that establishes credibility by appropriating a wide range of philosophical and theological resources in a way that also fits the empirical phenomenology of religion and accommodates modern sensibilities. This paper will first offer a selective sketch of Hick’s position with special attention to clarifications he has made in light of his critics. An equally selective overview of Hick’s critics will draw further attention to different ways Hick’s pluralism was misunderstood, but without failing to also notice several of the most important critiques of his position. Our overview will end by underscoring what his pluralist hypothesis contributes to a theology of religions. This section will address the question of whether Hick’s proposal can be considered a genuinely Christian theology of religions.

Exposition: A Brief Summary of Hick’s Pluralist Hypothesis

There are many general interpretations of religion. These have usually been either naturalistic, treating religions as a purely human phenomenon or, if religious, have been developed within the confines of a particular confessional conviction which construes all other traditions in its own terms. The one type of theory that has seldom been attempted is a religious but not confessional interpretation of religion in its plurality of forms; and it is this that I shall be trying to offer here.

In spite of real contradictions between the truth claims of the world’s great religious traditions, Hick argues that each tradition constitutes very different but (so far as we can tell) more or less equally appropriate and valid ways of “conceiving, experiencing, and responding in life to” what could be called “the Real/Ultimate” or “ultimate reality,” which in and of itself is transcendent, infinite, ineffable, and transcategorical. To explain what this means it will be most helpful to

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6 I do not mean by “modern sensibilities” mere political correctness. “Modern sensibilities” here refers to the authoritative role given to science and the critical disciplines that methodologically preclude confessional commitments of a religious nature a priori as a means to make inquiries about truth more objective.

7 Hick, An Interpretation, 1.

8 Hick, The Rainbow, 149.
first consider a scientific analogy to the kind of claim Hick is making, an example that he himself offered in its defense. Buddhism and forms of Hinduism that view ultimate reality as impersonal (Nirvana or Brahman) on the one hand, and the Abrahamic traditions which view ultimate reality as personal on the other, can be brought up into a higher synthesis analogous to the synthesis scientists have been forced to postulate for the physical structure of light. Although not directly observable, under different experimental conditions light has been found to exemplify both wave-like and particle-like properties depending on how the scientists interacted with it. When interacting with it one way, it exuded a shower of particles; and when acted upon in another way, it behaves as a succession of waves. Light can be validly conceived in either way—as a shower of particles or a succession of waves—but light in and of itself is such that it cannot be reduced to either one.

Likewise ultimate reality an sich [or—in and of itself] cannot be directly known, yet it can be appropriately experienced as, conceived of, and responded to in a variety of ways (even contradictory ways). Hick calls this the “wave-particle complementarity in physics” and considers it an empirical analogy to how the properties of the Real are experienced in different (even contradictory) ways depending upon how the observer (and in the case of religion the practitioner) acts in relation to it. Although not using it as an argument, Hick also used the reality of a rainbow as pedagogical metaphor: “The rainbow, as the sun’s light refracted by the earth’s atmosphere into a glorious spectrum of colours, is a metaphor for the refraction of the divine Light by our human religious cultures.”

Hick drew from well-established ideas in preeminent philosophers and theologians to construct his pluralist hypothesis. This is no doubt one of the contributing factors to the durability of his work. He refused to get bogged down with pedantic debates on whether the philosophers he borrowed from would find his developments of their ideas acceptable, or whether he had correctly interpreted the nuances of their position as a whole. We shall discuss three of these developments: Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of “seeing-as,” Immanuel Kant’s distinction between the noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearances, and Dionysius’s notion of divine ineffability or transcategoriality.

The neo-Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion “according to which religious language constitutes an essentially autonomous ‘language game’ with its own internal criteria of truth, immune to challenge or criticism from those who do not participate in that language game,” was decisively rejected by Hick. This approach, he believed, stripped religion of all metaphysical

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9 Hick, An Interpretation, 245.


11 Hick, The Rainbow, x.

12 In the case of Wittgenstein, he believed that “such a procedure is perhaps in line with [Wittgenstein’s] own words in the Forward to the Investigations: ‘I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thought of his own.’” Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 18. This at once neutralizes potentially distracting hermeneutical questions that require synthesis of entire corpuses of major philosophers such as Kant. See Paul Eddy, who complains that Hick is using Kant in a cavalier fashion and oversimplifying the Kantian project in “Religious Pluralism and the Divine: Another Look at John Hick’s Neo-Kantian Proposal,” Religious Studies 30, no. 4 (1994): 473-78. See also Hick’s response in The Rainbow, 46.

13 Hick, Problems, 16.
claims and was often appropriated as a strategy for shielding religion from secular criticism of such claims.\textsuperscript{14} The piece of Wittgenstein’s philosophy he appropriated was the concept of “seeing-as.” Wittgenstein himself distinguished between two types of “seeing.” One type of seeing involves experiencing a picture in terms of raw sensory data—to see physically a thin paper, an array of colors, a certain size and position. The other type of seeing, “seeing-as,” involves interpretation of this raw data—to see it as a picture of a face. Apart from this second sense of “seeing-as,” there is no “meaning” attributed to the raw sensation of sight or the mounds of ink. Yet as Wittgenstein pointed out, in reality this distinction is merely hypothetical, for in actuality “we [only] see it as we interpret it.”\textsuperscript{15} Such a process of interpretation and the attribution of significance and meaning to the visual experience of sight, although distinguishable formally, is not something that can be separated from what we experience as “seeing,” but is part of what we do when we see. Hick’s expansion on this idea was as follows: we find meaning not only in sight experience, but in hearing, tasting, and smelling. We never simply hear, taste, and smell, but we hear a train, taste peppermint, or smell smoke. Therefore we “experience-as” in our “ordinary multi-dimensional awareness of the world.”\textsuperscript{16} Experiencing meaning (as distinguished from merely semantic meaning) is routinely applied to every event, situation, relationship, and more-or-less every aspect of our lives.

Meaning is the most general characteristic of conscious experience as such. For to be conscious is, normally, to be discriminately aware of various features of our surroundings in such a way that we can act appropriately (or at any rate in ways that we assume to be appropriate) in relation to them. … To find the world, or some aspect of it, meaningful is thus to find it intelligible—not in the intellectual sense of understanding it but in the practical sense that one is able to behave appropriately (or in a way that one takes to be appropriate) in relation to it. So defined, meaning is a pervasive characteristic of our environment as we perceive and inhabit it.\textsuperscript{17}

Although Hick believed that we normally experience life on multiple levels simultaneously, he distinguished between different “levels” of meaning and therefore experience—natural, social, ethical, and religious—each of which correspond on a continuum of lesser to greater exercise of

\textsuperscript{14} In his exchanges with D.Z. Phillips (one of Hick’s critics who used a neo-Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion), Hick attempted to get Phillips to admit to advocating a non-realist use of religious language, but Phillips seemed to never answer the questions directly. For example, when Hick asked him whether he believed that in addition to human consciousness there existed another consciousness that could be called the consciousness of God, Phillips rejected the question, choosing instead to argue that the concept was incoherent and meaningless. After Phillips passed away, Hick published an article in which he responded to recent criticisms from Phillips. In this article he also lamented: “Some of us would have preferred Phillips to be explicit in his religious non-realism.” John Hick, “D. Z. Phillips on God and Evil,” \textit{Religious Studies} 43, no. 4 (2007): 438-439. The non-realism of those advocating a neo-Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, seen by Hick as an attempt to dodge the tough metaphysical criticism of secular philosophy, was something I think Hick interpreted as a sign of philosophical timidity cloaked in convenient post-modern Wittgensteinian garb.


\textsuperscript{16} Hick, \textit{Problems}, 19.

\textsuperscript{17} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation}, 130-131.
cognitive freedom. Whereas we are (for all practical purposes) forced by cognitive equipment to experience a rock as hard (there is not much choice in the matter by way of thinking of it as soft spongy matter), when we extract the sorts of meanings given to social relationships or events, we see that a much greater level of cognitive freedom is involved, and a much greater ambiguity exists. When my wife appears irritated and I ask “What’s wrong?” and she responds with a notoriously curt “nothing,” or when close friends fail to invite me to their apparently otherwise inclusive get-together, interpretation becomes a more difficult task and requires a greater level of interpretive sophistication. When we come to the ethical questions the ambiguity is only deepened: Is Kevin a murderer or was he acting in self-defense? Is America spreading the good of democracy out of a desire to free the oppressed or is Uncle Sam a global bully strategically sticking his nose in the business of nations out of his own self-interest? Is it OK that my wife no longer loves me and wants to move on, and if so, why do I feel so wronged by her filing for an uncontested divorce? Does Jerome deserve to be taught a lesson for putting his hands on my girlfriend? Given that Hick has defined meaning in terms of appropriate responses and subsequently dispositions that incline one to respond in one way rather than another, Hick was not quite sure how to categorize aesthetic experiences, for some argue they create no disposition to behave in any way, but leave the practical consciousness suspended, as it were, to simply enjoy the raw sensation of colors, shapes, movements, etc.

Placing emphasis on how these various levels of meaning are continuous in our actual experience and unable to be disentangled, he broadens the question to focus on life as a whole, for it is here that life is capable of being experienced after the mold of a natural interpretation or a religious interpretation. In spite of all the philosophy wars between naturalism on the one hand and religious interpretations on the other, Hick argues that the universe is ambiguous in and of itself, capable of being experienced in both ways. This means he did not believe philosophical argumentation for either position was conclusive, but he held the rare position that naturalistic interpretations and religious interpretations alike were both irrefutable (that is, neither can be proven or disproven by argumentation conclusively). This creates an exceptional level of cognitive freedom on the question. Hick saw this as preserving human freedom in relation to the Real, for whereas sensory experience (such as being hit in the head with a rock) virtually compel us to interpret phenomenon in a very particular way, a religious interpretation of the universe is uncompelled interpretation, and faith he defined as “the interpretive element in Religious experience.” Here he also follows Aquinas in holding a distinction between faith and knowledge—knowledge is compelled by its object to assent to its reality, whereas faith is uncompelled interpretation through an act of choice. Because ultimate reality is ineffable, infinite, and transcategorical (an idea we have yet to explore), it has accordingly been experienced in a plethora of ways by the world’s major religious traditions, all of which can be seen as resulting in appropriate conceptions of the Ultimate for those who experience them as such. These conceptions are referred to ubiquitously in Hick’s work as the divine personae and metaphysical impersonae relatively speaking, in order to cover both theistic faiths and non-theistic faiths. Although none of these conceptions resulting from religious experience can be seen as final and complete, they can be seen as responding to different aspects of ultimate reality

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and “reducing it to forms that could be coped with” and responded to in practical ways. The world’s different major religious traditions are different cultural contexts of these responses, and thus bear the mark of cultural partiality and human finitude.

Now here we have come a long way from the discourse of Wittgenstein, but Hick has expanded his notion of “seeing-as” to “experiencing-as,” along with his conviction of the ultimate ambiguity of the universe to conceive the nature of religious experience as involving uncompelled interpretation that preserves cognitive and human freedom in relation to ultimate reality. Although the Real is able to be experienced-as in many ways, its true metaphysical contours cannot be known. This brings us to what is sometimes called Hick’s neo-Kantian synthesis. German philosopher Immanuel Kant distinguished between reality apart from our perception of it, which he called the noumenal, and reality as it appears to us, which he called the phenomenal. He argued that all sense perception is filtered through built-in concepts of the human mind that decisively determine how we organize and interpret the raw data of sense experience. We only know objective reality (the noumenal) through imposing our default mental categories on our experience. In fact, such categories are the preconditions of human experience. Hick saw Kant’s main insight as one that helped us understand how the structure of the human mind contributes to all perception. Although Kant was referring to basic human concepts presumably universal, Hick appropriated this distinction to argue that cultures also shape the structure of the human mind in such a way that the same reality can potentially be conceived of in ways that conform to culturally peculiar schemas of thought, and because the Ultimate is infinite and beyond all human conceptions (a notion we will come to next), the human mind is actually aided by such ready-made cultural schematizations in its attempt to interpret and respond appropriately to it; hence the divine personae and metaphysical impersonae among the world’s great religious traditions.

Finally, we come to Hick’s notion of the Real itself, which he argues is transcendent, ineffable, infinite, and transcategorical, and therefore does not directly correspond to any human concepts or metaphysical assertions or denials. In this respect he is not merely following apophatic theology, for he treats denials and affirmations as equally inapplicable to the Real an sich. Hick argued that the ineffability of God was taught (with different nuances) in such preeminent theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Paul Tillich, so attributing this view to Dionysius is here for pedagogy, but also because Hick viewed Dionysius as unique in the way he is keen to notice and directly addresses the dilemma created between this view of God and the Biblical language about God. Hick believed

20 Hick, An Interpretation, 163.


22 Hick also believed that Aquinas’s theology had already anticipated Kant’s insight, for it was Aquinas who said: “The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.” Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, rev. ed. (1948; repr., Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1981), II-II.1.2. Hick’s choice of using Kant rather than Aquinas as the key springboard for this development was likely owing to his attempt at constructing a philosophy of religion within the discourse of Western analytical philosophy, for Kant is a major authority within this tradition.

23 Hick, An Interpretation, xx.
that this notion of ineffability is “in one form or another … required by the thought that God … is unlimited and therefore may not be equated without remainder with anything that can be humanly experienced and defined.”

Dionysius is especially helpful in Hick’s construction of a pluralist hypothesis because although he did not use the buzzword “transcategoriality,” he explicitly says “the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge. It abides beyond the realm of mind and of being. … escaping form any perception, imagination, opinion, discourse, apprehension, or understanding,” and regards all biblical language about God as therefore metaphorical.

Hick believed attempts to interpret biblical language literally (such as the relational doctrines of the Trinity or the philosophical developments of Chalcedonian Christology) were actually incompatible with this basic theological insight held by virtually all the major preeminent theologians in the Christian Tradition (both Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant). Critics have called this view of religious language transcendental or ontological agnosticism, and argued that Hick “severs” religious language from any transcendent reality.

But Hick saw this label as inaccurate. If agnosticism is understood as the claim that we simply cannot know whether there is a transcendent reality or not, it would indeed be misleading to apply this to Hick’s hypothesis, which did in fact postulate a transcendental Ultimate as the best explanation for the global phenomenon of religious experience and its fruits. Furthermore, Hick even allowed that this Ultimate has a nature, but denied that this nature could be expressed with any human concepts because it transcends all such concepts which are finite and partial and could therefore never capture the infinite Ultimate in itself. Furthermore, he held that we can in fact consider the Real as “good or benign, or gracious,” so long as we understand that these refer to the Real “in relation to us—that is, in terms of the difference it makes to us. … So the sense in which the Real is good, benign, gracious is analogous to that in which the sun is, from our point of view, good, friendly, life-giving,” etc.

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27 If agnosticism is understood as the claim that we cannot know whether specific attributes (such as goodness, wisdom, personhood, etc.) attributed to the Real are true or false, this would also fail to apply to Hick’s view: “The reason why we cannot apply these terms to the Real is not that we do no profess to know whether or not they apply, which would be correctly characterized as agnosticism, but because all such terms are part of our human conceptual field, the range of ideas embodied in our languages, and according to the pluralistic hypothesis the Real is beyond, or outside, this conceptual field.” Hick, *An Interpretation*, xx.


29 Hick, *The Rainbow*, 63. Due to his doctrine of the ambiguity of the universe (discussed above) Hick did believe “any realistic analysis of religious belief and experience, and any realistic defense of the rationality of religious conviction, must therefore start from this situation of systematic ambiguity.” Hick, *An Interpretation*, 124. His starting point, however, must be distinguished from his final hypothesis.
It is necessary to any summary of Hick’s pluralism to mention a few of the ways Hick has also appropriated ideas among the world’s great religious traditions, especially his criterion for authentic responses to the Ultimate. First, Hick argues that something akin to Kant’s philosophical distinction between noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearances has been argued with respect to the Real in each of the great religious traditions. For example, Mahayana Buddhism distinguishes between the ultimate Dharmakaya and its diversified expression in the heavenly Buddhas of the Sambhogakaya and its incarnations on the Nirmanakaya. Also the Qur’an teaches that “the eyes attain Him not, but He attains the eyes,” and a distinction is found in Sufi Islam between Al Haq (the Real) on the one hand and its revealed form as the personal deity Allah on the other. Likewise within Hinduism can be found the distinction between “nirguna Brahman, Brahman without attributes, exceeding the grasp of human language, and saguna Brahman, Brahman with attributes, known within human religious experience as Ishvara, the personal creator and governor of the universe.” Again, the Kabbalist mystics of the Judaic tradition “distinguished between En Soph, the absolute divine reality beyond human description, and the God of the Bible.” Hick’s familiarity with the world’s great religious traditions adds a potentially broader credibility to his neo-Kantian synthesis for those who may be unfamiliar or unsympathetic with the Western analytic philosophical tradition.

If Hick’s self-appointed aim is to provide a non-confessional pluralist hypothesis, from whence comes the possibility of any objective criterion for establishing whether any given religious tradition can be considered legit—that is, an appropriate response to the Real? Hick provides an account of his understanding of the function of religion, along with what he calls soft criterion (as opposed to hard criterion) “in that it does not deal in anything that can be precisely measured.” Though soft, this is also a practical criterion in that it is used in all the world’s major religious traditions and therefore their adherents operate with it implicitly or explicitly (e.g. “You will know them by their fruits,” Mt 7:20). In order to clarify Hick’s position against distortions of his views by certain critics, however, who have made Hick’s criterion into “the

30 Hick understands the world’s major religious traditions primarily as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Hick, The Rainbow, 11.

31 Hick, An Interpretation, 236-37.

32 Hick, An Interpretation, 236.

33 Hick, An Interpretation, 237.

34 Hick, The Rainbow, 77.

35 That is, critics who accuse Hick of reducing human salvation to mere transformation of the ego in a way that sever salvation from any need of God and defines religion apart from any metaphysical claims. This is a serious mistake of interpretation, for Hick’s view of salvation is a profound “reorientation” to the transcendent metaphysical reality of the ineffable “Real.” Thus his soteriology is bound up with a lofty metaphysical claim. Gavin D’Costa, for example, makes the mistake many times of attributing a non-realist position to Hick in spite of the heavy metaphysical postulate of the “Real” as central to salvation and all salvific religions, describing Hick’s view of religious language as “entirely instrumental,” a distortion of the most central hypothesis in all of Hick’s pluralist advocacy. D’Costa, “Taking Other Religions Seriously,” 522-23. Meeker has also criticized Hick’s view as making altruistic behavior the “essence” of all major religions. Kevin Meeker, “Pluralism, exclusivism, and the theoretical virtues,” Religious Studies 42, no. 2 (2006), 200. See also Hick’s response in “Exclusivism versus Pluralism,” 210-12.
essence” of religion, the function of religion and the criterion for authenticity in religion, though related, must be distinguished. The function of religious traditions, and therefore the closest thing to an “essence” of a religion is a profound reorientation of human life from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.\(^{36}\) It is thus a human transformation. In Christian terms this would be a *soteriological* function. But the reason this must be distinguished from the criterion of authenticity is that it only pushes the question of criterion back a step, for how does one know for sure whether she has experienced such transformation? Hick answers: “the only way in which we are able to observe this salvific reorientation is in its effects in human life,” but the chief criterion in this respect is “love/compassion for others—this occurring, needless to say, in many stages and degrees.”\(^{37}\) This, Hick believes, is the central moral fruit of any great religious tradition and constitutes the criterion for authenticity. It is by now uncontroversial (although Hick still strings together impressive quotations form the world’s great religions)\(^{38}\) that the golden rule—love your neighbor as yourself—is formulated either positively or negatively within each of the great traditions. What is more, Hick claims it is actually a “natural human moral insight.”\(^{39}\) When asked how he knows this constitutes an appropriate response to the Real, Hick’s reply is as candid as can be: “There are no non-circular ways of establishing fundamental positions,” and he borrows here from Alvin Plantinga’s notion of a “properly basic belief” that one is within their epistemological rights in taking it for granted.\(^{40}\) When accused of arguing in a circle, he concedes: “It’s a circle, I agree, but it’s the kind of circle which any comprehensive view inevitably involves. … This criterion is integral to the basic religious faith, and this faith as a whole constitutes a circle in the sense that it cannot be independently established.”\(^{41}\)

We are at last in a position to see how Hick’s pluralist hypothesis has significant implications for any theology of religions. Concerning Hick’s criterion, he argues that it is impossible to give a precise and decisive answer to the question of whether any of the world’s major religious traditions evidence the central fruit of love/compassion more or less than the next.

I maintain that so far as we can tell this salvific transformation is taking place—and also failing to take place—to more or less the same extent within each of the great world faiths. There is no one religion whose adherents stand out as morally and spiritually superior to the

\(^{36}\) Hick’s way of overcoming the tedious debates about how to define “religion” lie in Wittgenstein’s discussion of “family resemblance” in which “there are no characteristics that every member must have,” but rather “different traditions, movements and ideologies whose religious character is either generally agreed or responsible debated” do not each have a common “essence” per se, but form “a complex continuum of resemblances and differences analogous to those found within a family.” Hick, *An Interpretation*, 4.


\(^{38}\) Hick, *An Interpretation*, 316ff.

\(^{39}\) Hick, “Exclusivism vs. Pluralism,” 211.

\(^{40}\) Hick, “Exclusivism vs. Pluralism: A Response to Kevin Meeker” 211.

\(^{41}\) Hick, *The Rainbow*, 78.
rest of the human race. (If anyone claims such a superiority for their own religious community, the onus of proof, or of argument, is clearly upon them).

Given the nature of the criterion—that is, its “softness” (dealing with entities that cannot be precisely measured), the operative prejudice that would be inevitably involved in evaluating the evidence, and the sheer scope of such a wide variety of religious phenomenon within a given tradition at any given point in history (not to mention throughout the ages), combined with the task of exploring all relevant evidence for all the major religious traditions, Hick did not think it a reasonable task to expect for anyone to make a conclusive case for the superiority of any of the major religious traditions over the rest. Hick’s criterion for appropriate response to the Real thus places all the major religious traditions on a more-or-less equal footing while at the same time clearly excludes certain religious traditions on the basis of their fruit (or lack thereof).

It is precisely at this point that Hick’s pluralism creates tension with any religion who views itself as superior to the rest. He especially challenged the Christian tradition on this point:

If we take literally the traditional belief that in Christ we have an uniquely full revelation of God and an uniquely direct relationship with God, so that in the church we are members of the body of Christ, taking the divine life into our lives in the Eucharist, and living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then surely this ought to produce some noticeable difference in our lives. Christians ought to be better human beings than those who lack these inestimable spiritual benefits. … So we are stuck on the horns of a dilemma. We either have to claim, against the evidence of our experience, that as members of the body of Christ Christians in general are better human beings than non-Christians, or we are going to have to rethink those of our traditional doctrines that entail that.

In this fashion, Hick argued that the traditional doctrine of incarnation, as well as most forms of inclusivism (which interpret all salvation as Christian salvation and acknowledge no other kind) are in conflict with “the realities of human life, a contradiction between theological theory and

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42 Hick, *An Interpretation*, xxvi. Again: “Whilst we can to some extent assess and grade religious phenomena, we cannot realistically assess and grade the great world religions as totalities. For each of these long traditions is so internally diverse, containing so many different kinds of both good and evil, that it is impossible for human judgment to weigh up and compare their merits as systems of salvation. It may be that on facilitates human liberation/salvation more than the others; but if so this is not evident to human vision. So far as we can tell, they are equally productive of that transition from self to Reality which we see in the saints of all traditions. Hick, *Problems*, 86-87.

43 And this bewildering task would only be complicated by adding to this list the worlds minor religious traditions (not to mention new religions that are always sprouting up all over the globe). Hick therefore limits his pluralist hypothesis to only the major religious traditions, although he did comment upon them, warning “any judgment about them has to be based on a close examination of each particular movement, and all that one can say in general is that the same criterion must apply as in the case of the great world faiths.” Hick, *The Rainbow*, 110.

44 For example: “the Japanese sect which put sarin gas in Tokyo underground, and such semi- or pseudo-religious movements as Nazism and Fascism, fail spectacularly under this criterion.” Hick, *An Interpretation*, xxvi.

observable fact. It is this that has led many of us to feel the need for revision.” This call for the revision of Christian dogma drew scorn from conservative Christian theologians and was perhaps the most disconcerting aspects of his pluralist hypothesis, although it could be seen as an implication of his pluralism more than an explicit part of his argued hypothesis. Yet it is precisely the fact that he attempted to hold on to the notions of incarnation and Trinity as central themes for Christianity that simultaneously places him squarely within the Christian tradition—albeit the liberal stream of that tradition. He held that these traditional doctrines can be seen as mythically true rather than literally true—by which he meant that they are capable (when understood as myths) of evoking “in the hearer an appropriate dispositional attitude to the story’s referent, which in the case of myth always transcends the story itself.” The background assumptions also shaping Hick’s critique are derived from the consensus of the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship which—in spite of hotly contested details that will likely be endlessly debated—has agreed that Jesus did not consider himself to be literally a Son of God, but only in the metaphorical sense widely used in second temple Judaism—the same sense in which David was called a son of God.

In the end, then, Hick’s pluralist hypothesis leaves the world’s religious traditions as they are—provided they weed out any notions that imply their own superiority over all the other major religious traditions. Hick’s transparency about this controversial aspect of his pluralist hypothesis was exceptional and appreciated even by his most outspoken critics.

There should therefore be no concealment of the fact that one part of the dogmatic structure is being modified in order to retain the acceptability of another part and that this is being done, under the pressure of our modern sensibility, in order to make room for the salvation of the non-Christian majority of humankind. For those who define salvation in exclusively Christian terms some such doctrinal modification is today unavoidable.

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46 Hick, *The Rainbow*, 113. This was not, however, the only grounds upon which Hick criticized traditional Christian dogma that he saw as implying the unique superiority of Christianity, for he attempted to sustain a case against tradition Chalcedonian Christology on the basis of its incoherency. In this respect, he critiqued its most philosophically robust defenses by his contemporaries. See his critique, for example, of Thomas Morris’s book *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986) in John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 58-76.

47 Hick’s views fit quite easily into the liberal stream of Christian thought due to his postulating an “essence” of the major world religions and inasmuch as his Christology was a “degree” Christology. See Alister McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750-1990*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994).


50 Hick, *The Rainbow*, 123.


It must also be noted, however, that Hick’s view would also call for a realist, yet non-literal interpretation of language about God, but Hick does not mention this as a second necessary revision because he finds such a view about God-talk to be held already by virtually all the key thinkers in the Christian tradition, although he does not think they always faced up to the consequences of this doctrine for God-talk. This means there are at least four reasons why Christians should revise their traditional dogma about the relational Trinity and Chalcedonian Christology: 1) they are inconsistent with the classic doctrine of ineffability, which demands that all God-talk be taken as non-literal (whereas the relational doctrine of the Trinity and Chalcedonian Christology are literal interpretations of biblical language), 2) they are incoherent (or at least the Chalcedonian Christology is), 3) such views were not held by Jesus himself (and here he pulls from historical-critical consensus), and 4) they imply Christianity’s superiority over all the other major religious traditions which contradicts the moral landscape of global religions which seems to show (so far as we can tell) that each major religious tradition is equally effective in yielding in their adherents the sort of fruit that is central to Christianity itself (transcending the ego in love and compassion for others). In the last section of this paper, we will be exploring more carefully, in light of Hick’s rejection of orthodox doctrine such as the personal Trinity or Chalcedonian Christology, whether his hypothesis could be considered a specifically Christian hypothesis.

**Evaluation By Critics**

Critiques of Hick are more numerous than his own writings, and based on mere output alone his views might be considered the most controversial among pluralist positions. These criticisms can be divided into three types: (1) criticisms of the philosophical adequacy or coherency of his views, (2) criticisms of the theological acceptability of his views, and (3) criticisms of a social nature that might be called ethical criticisms. Like any exposition of Hick’s position, any survey of criticisms will inevitably be very selective, as the literature itself is something that could constitute its own critical genre! There is a lack of consensus as to what exactly the fundamental flaw of Hick’s hypothesis actually is, for the grounds of criticism are more numerous than the world’s major religions. This could be interpreted, of course, in more than one way: it could indicate, for example, that Hick’s views are incoherent or inadequate on so many levels that critics are forced to offer a dizzying array of criticism to keep up with all of Hick’s philosophical blunders. An equally possible interpretation, however, could take the breadth of Hickean criticism (as a discipline in its own right) as indicating a happier estimation of Hick’s pluralist hypothesis: for example, that it is so persuasively argued that if critics cannot undermine his arguments with arguments of their own (and in a hurry get everyone on board to reject it), we can expect his position to be widely adopted in our growing pluralistic context. This latter interpretation is perhaps the more likely of the two to reflect the actual situation, since

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53 Here I borrow from Hick’s division of criticism between the philosophical and theological in *The Rainbow of Faiths: A Christian Theology of Religions* but especially from the wording of Paul Rhodes Eddy in *John Hick’s Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions*, xi.

54 Or, to put it another way, that Hick’s philosophical bucket has so many holes in it, that it takes a hundred philosophers to point them all out and demonstrate the implausibility of repairing the bucket by plugging the holes.
as Paul Eddy points out, at least one thing “Hick’s partisans and critics alike agree upon” is that “no one has produced a more intellectually sophisticated and provocative apologetic for the pluralist paradigm.”

A sampling of the critical literature may, however, prove disappointing for those who have read Hick’s work carefully, for a great deal of the criticism does not apply to Hick’s careful formulations, which keenly anticipate most (if not all) of the major criticisms leveled against it. Countless are the times when Hick’s main response to his critics was merely to restate his position and point to his writings to demonstrate that his view had been misrepresented. In one of the books he devoted almost entirely to responding directly to more than a dozen of his critics, his introduction was an eloquent complaint that the academic community has not generally handled controversy very well, and he lamented that very few were his critics who had actually understood his position or his arguments. A sampling of some misrepresentations of his position will underscore the point more deftly, as misrepresentations of his arguments for that position would be more tedious than this paper will allow. The following are views that Hick did not hold:

1. All religions are paths to the Real.
2. The pluralist hypothesis can be demonstrated to be true by argument.
3. Whatever differences exist between religious traditions are trivial or insignificant.

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55 Eddy, John Hick’s Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions, 127.


57 One can only understand the irresponsible misrepresentation of both Hick’s views and his arguments as inevitable elements of controversy—that is, in most cases, those who are misrepresenting his views are doing so in an attempt to make their own case that his position is untenable or weakly argued. However, it must be said in fairness that critics who were not keeping up with Hick’s latest views (which were always in the process of refinement) would often accuse him of incoherency when he changed his position on a particular question. Placing quotations of his earlier work side-by-side with quotations from his newer works (in which he had taken a different position) was for some time presented as evidence that Hick had contradicted himself and was incoherent. For an example of this fallacy see Gavin D’Costa, Theology of Religious Pluralism, 37ff. Gerald Loughlin, “Prefacing Pluralism: John Hick and the Mastery of Religion,” Modern Theology 7, no. 1 (1990): 29-55. See also Hick’s response: John Hick, “A Response to Gerard Loughlin,” Modern Theology 7, no. 1 (1990): 57-65; “Straightening the Record: Some Response to Critics,” Modern Theology 6, no. 2 (1990): 195. Some critics make a big deal out of the developments of his views over the years as if this automatically indicates that he had to change his views because his position was a total failure, when in reality the sophistication of his arguments were so persuasive they catapulted him into the limelight of controversy in a way unparallel by any other pluralist advocate—all of which in turn forced him to respond and refine his views in light of what he considered to be legitimate criticism. This could be interpreted in terms of humility and honesty, and the points at which his position changed could be interpreted positively as refinements of his views rather than evidence that his views were a “philosophical and theological disaster” from the beginning. See Ron Nash, Is Jesus the Only Savior?, 38. Hick’s standard antidote for this criticism was a quotation from Jonathan Swift: “A man should never be ashamed to own that he has been mistaken, which is but saying, in other words, that he is wiser today than he was yesterday.” Hick, The Rainbow, 66.


59 Hick, An Introduction, xiii.
4. Religious adherents are not within their epistemological rights to hold to exclusivist dogmas.  
5. Only empirical evidence can be the ground of our beliefs.  
6. All religions are fundamentally the same or are “fundamentally saying the same thing.”  
7. We can say absolutely nothing about the Real since it is ineffable.  
8. Religious language is entirely instrumental.

First, as we have already seen, Hick’s criterion rules out many religions. Second, Hick’s self-understanding of his contribution was far from anything demonstrative. He saw his entire project as simply suggesting a possible approach to creating a best explanation of the phenomenon of religious pluralism (and a preliminary approach at that—destined to be superseded). In other words, he saw his hypothesis merely as a “working hypothesis” not an absolute truth. His exchange with Keith Ward brought this point out more clearly, as Ward summarized Hick’s argument successfully and concluded that it was not a logically sound argument. The response from Hick was that he always considered his pluralist hypothesis as an attempt at a “best explanation” not a proof, “because it is always open to someone else to come forward and offer what they believe as a better explanation.” On this basis he challenged

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65 See footnote 35.

66 Indeed, Paul Hedges makes the case that on a credible definition of postmodernism, Hick’s work can be seen as fitting the postmodern ethos by avoiding a master narrative, failing to claim his hypothesis as “knowledge” (which would exert “power”), deferring any final conclusions (seeing his work as provisional and deferring also eschatological questions), and by failing to speak from a “fixed vantage point” (the last of these four criterion for being postmodern being the most difficult to apply to Hick given the exclusive function of his moral criterion). Paul Hedges, “A Post-modern Reading of John Hick’s Pluralist Hypothesis,” *Interreligious Insight* 2, no. 2 (2004): 44-55.

67 “In the end the question is not, Where is the perfect theory to account, from a religious point of view, for the world-wide phenomenon of religion? For the ever-expanding phenomenology of religion ensures that no such theory will ever be perfect. The question is, What is presently the most adequate available working hypothesis?” John Hick, “Straightening the Record: Some Responses to Critics,” 193.


Ward’s approach by suggesting that rather than complain that he has not offered sufficient “proof” (something Hick was not aiming at in the first place), Ward should offer a viable alternative.

The third proposition above is wrong on two grounds: first, Hick’s pluralist hypothesis excludes many religions by his golden rule criterion, so clearly he sees this as a majorly significant difference between religions. Even if we restrict this proposition only to those who pass such a criterion, however, we still find Hick’s position distorted. Building on his distinction between mythical claims, metaphysical claims, and eschatological claims, Hick adopted Buddha’s approach—that these are “undetermined questions” that are unnecessary for achieving salvation—“in spite of the fact that some of us are paid to spend our time working on these questions!” But they still, on Hick’s view, “make a difference” and have “extensive ramifying implications” even if they are not practically necessary for achieving salvation.

Fourth, in his exchange with Alvin Plantinga, Hick conceded Plantinga’s case that “it is epistemically OK to be an exclusivist” and that exclusivism is not morally reprehensible in itself (although he did have a concern about tendencies of exclusivists). His problem with Plantinga’s principle for epistemological justification is that it “applies not only to Christians but equally to members of the other world religions.” Indeed, unlike Hick’s criterion, which helps his pluralist hypothesis limit its application to exclude certain religions, Plantinga’s principle applies even to Satanic religions (and indeed all religious experience). As Twiss has summarized Hick’s argument: “one must play fair with regard to the principle of credulity.”

Hick saw Plantinga’s arguments as merely a defensive strategy to justify specifically Christian religious experience in order to then justify “knowing” a priori that all other religions are false.

I acknowledge that, so long as he sticks rigidly to his position, the exclusivist is encased in an impenetrable armour, from within which he knows a priori that all faiths except his own are false. But this purely defensive stance does not help us when we try to think realistically about religion on a global scale. And I suggest that a philosopher of religion [which Plantinga is] (not restricting ‘religion’ to the one that she happens to have been born into), as distinguished from a religious believer as such, should address the question of the relationship between religions.

To the fifth proposition: appreciation was in fact expressed by Hick for Plantinga’s contribution to the philosophy of religion, for he actually borrowed from his language. For example, Hick

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70 Hick, The Rainbow, 52.

71 Hick, The Rainbow, 53; Problems, 90. The differences between the great religious traditions that meet the golden rule criterion, Hick argues, “can never be more than penultimately important.” Ibid., 89.


75 Hick, “Exclusivism Versus Pluralism,” 207.
considered belief in the golden rule to be “a properly basic belief” (borrowing from Plantinga’s termenology) and freely admitted that it cannot be proven empirically.\(^76\) Furthermore, the broadest way to categorize Hick among philosophers of religion is as a realist with regard to the use of religious language—that is, he does not follow Feuerbach’s reduction of religious language to a projection theory where all religious language is mere human projection.\(^77\) On the other hand, he considers himself a critical realist in that although religious experience is not “in toto human imaginative projection,” nevertheless, experience of the Real is indirect and always culturally conditioned enough to give rise to a wide variety of religious expression involving human conceptuality and imagination.\(^78\) In this taxonomy, he considered Plantinga’s approach to be naïve realism, since Plantinga holds that religious experience is direct experience of God and then goes on to justify the experiencer’s trust in the Christian language about God as absolute, which rules out the possibility of any other religion being true. Naïve realism, Hick would argue, is not playing fair with respect to the principle of credulity (and does not take into account the bigger picture of religious diversity globally), for it bases its epistemic justification of absolutism in the same phenomenon which could be equally used to justify any religion—namely, experience.

Sixthly, as I stressed in my summary of Hick, he does not teach that all religions are the same or are saying the same thing.\(^79\) First, not all religions qualify as appropriate responses to the Real (as we have seen). Second, for those that do, Hick’s hypothesis of religious pluralism is designed to address the question: if they all appear to be equally effective in the human transformation from ego-centeredness to Reality centeredness which results in love of neighbor, why do they all have different (indeed contradictory) teachings about the nature of the Real? His answer is that each response is saying something different because they are addressing different manifestations of the Real to human experience. When human beings relate to the Real through their culturally conditioned ways, they experience the Real in these culturally conditioned ways. When they relate to ultimate reality as personal, they experience it as personal; when relating to ultimate reality as impersonal, they experienced it as impersonal.\(^80\) Since the Real is infinite, different aspects of it can become the foci of religious traditions, and their cultural conditioning often both determines and influences which aspect of ultimate reality their religion focuses on and how this reality is subsequently schematized in religious language. Here we must remember Hick’s analogy to the complementary principle in physics to explain the phenomenon of light

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\(^76\) Hick, “Exclusivism Versus Pluralism,” 211.

\(^77\) Hick, *An Interpretation*, 190ff.


\(^79\) Critics of philosophical pluralism often use propositions (1) and (2) above (that Hick himself did not hold) together as the basic claim of a pluralist position. All pluralist positions hold “to one form or another of the view that all religions are really saying the same thing or that all achieve salvation” effectively. See D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 26.

\(^80\) In fact, Hick goes as far to say “when human beings relate themselves to the Real in the mode of non-personal awareness they experience it as non-personal, and in the context of this relationship it is non-personal.” Hick, *An Interpretation*, 245. This comment is difficult to understand in light of his doctrine of the ineffability of the Real.
(see above): the focus of each religious tradition is “about different phenomenal realities.”

Again, “these different foci of worship and meditation are not identical with the Real itself,” but are “different persona or impersona of the Real.” Indeed Hick saw one of the greatest merits of his pluralist hypothesis in that it “can remove any temptation to think of the different traditions as ‘all the same’ or ‘all alike’, and can free us to notice and to be fascinated by all the differences that the phenomenology of religion reveals.”

Religions are not all the same because they are different responses to different manifestations of a transcendental reality beyond our human concepts. Beyond this, Hick also distinguishes between mythical, metaphysical, and eschatological contradictions (as we have seen) between the world’s major religions. Criticisms of Hick’s pluralism that brush over these key features of Hicks work and lump him with other pluralists who teach that all religions are “saying the same thing,” then, betray a lack of familiarity with the aims of his hypothesis.

Seventh, Alister McGrath’s contention that if we follow Hick, we can say absolutely nothing about the Real (such as that it is ineffable, for example) is mistaken, as Hick’s exchange with Alvin Plantinga demonstrated. Hick has distinguished between purely formal attributes such as “being able to be referred to” that do not tell us anything about the ultimate nature or essence of the Real, and “substantial properties” such as being personal or impersonal. The former attributes, being purely formal, can be applied to the Real as a necessary postulate to make sense of religious plurality without revealing anything about the ultimate nature or essence of the Real—whether it is personal or impersonal, just or unjust, good or evil, etc. He further distinguishes between religiously relevant and religiously irrelevant postulates about the nature of the Real, the latter constituting attributes like being a tricycle or non-tricycle, a teapot or a non-teapot (and here is responding to Plantinga’s criticism). “It would do no harm religiously” (even if inaccurate) to call the Real “non-blue, non-heap of manure, non-tricycle,” etc., because nothing significant follows from these with implications for the relationship between world religions (perhaps he could have added here that none of the world’s major religious traditions experiences ultimate reality as a tricycle or teapot). The eighth proposition is perhaps the most serious distortion of all, for Hick was most certainly a critical realist with respect to the use of

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83 Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 178.

84 Again, “The idea that each of the great world religions is a response to the ultimately real, and that each is a context of human salvation, does not mean that they are all the same, or that they all say the same thing, or follow the same practices, or have identical moral codes and cultural life-styles. On the contrary, religious pluralism sees them as different, often very different, totalities consisting of distinctive ways of conceiving and experiencing the Real.” Hick, *The Rainbow*, 41 [italics added].

85 Hick, *An Interpretation*, xxi.

86 Hick, *An Interpretation*, xxi.

87 Hick, *An Interpretation*, xxii.
religious language and sharply criticized non-realist neo-Wittgensteinian views of religious language.\(^88\)

Feminist criticism scored an often overlooked point on Hick to which he conceded. June O’Conner argued (on the basis of Valerie Saiving Goldstein’s work) that for many women Hick’s defining of salvation as ego-transcendence will not apply. Women who have been oppressed and degraded as human beings have an underdeveloped ego or negated ego. Hick replied: “Insofar as anyone, women or men (for many men also have been damaged by oppression), lack a sense of their own worth, it may be necessary for the ego first to be built up as a prerequisite of the salvific transformation.”\(^89\) This is a good example of how Hick was very responsive to his critics and often developed his position on the basis of their criticisms (although, even in recognizing this as a legitimate criticism, he confessed it as a fault that his writings did not address or stress this feminist point enough).

Perhaps the most significant criticism of Hick’s pluralist hypothesis is that it fails to do justice to what religions say about themselves. With respect to Christianity in particular, Hick’s hypothesis (as we have seen) calls for Christians to revise some of their most prized dogmas (the relational Trinity and Chalcedonian Christology). Likewise, in as much as any other religion has absolutist claims that imply superiority Hick’s pluralist hypothesis challenges them to revise this aspect of their tradition. (We have already discussed this aspect of his work). Harold Netland argues that the hermeneutical adequacy of Hick’s hypothesis fails precisely at the point where it fails to “accommodate adequately the various soteriological claims internal to traditions as these claims are understood within the traditions themselves.”\(^90\) This same point is argued by Gavin D’Costa, who points out that Hick’s pluralist hypothesis does not agree at every point with each religious tradition’s own self-understanding.\(^91\) Hick admits to this, but thinks it part of his duty as a philosopher of religion to explain the problem of religious pluralism, which entails contradictory or rival absolute truth claims. “Let’s remember the basic problem we’re trying to

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\(^88\) Hick distinguished his views with exceptional clarity on this point in “Religious Realism and Non-realism,” in Hick, Disputed Questions, 3-16. E.g. “Now the cosmic optimism of the great world faiths depends upon a realist interpretation of their language. For it is only if this universe is the creation or expression of an ultimate overarching benign reality, and is such that the spiritual project of our existence continues in some form beyond this present life, that it is possible to expect a fulfillment that can justify the immense pain and travail of the journey. If, on the contrary, such notions as God, Brahman, Dharmakaya, rebirth, eternal life, are figments of our imaginations, we must face the grim fact that the marvelous human spiritual potential will only be fulfilled to the very fragmentary extent that it is in fact fulfilled in this world—none at all in some, a little in most of us, and a great deal in a very few.” Ibid., 12. See also footnote 32.

\(^89\) Hick, An Interpretation, xxxviii.


solve. Not more than one of these rival belief-systems could be finally and universally true.”

He thus admits the charge, but claims “in the sense in which this is so, it is a virtue and not a vice.” And finally, D’Costa claims that since Hick’s pluralism operates with a criterion that includes some religions and excludes others, his so-called religious pluralism is not really pluralism at all, but a form of exclusivism. In his response to this article, Hick argues that

[T]o think using criteria, as such, constitutes exclusivism, although intelligible in a purely notional and trivial sense, is much more misleading than helpful. In this trivial and misleading sense one is an exclusivist when one admires Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama but condemns Hitler and Stalin; or when an umpire declares a foul in football; or even when one distinguishes between left and right, or night and day, or makes such an innocent statement as that it is raining! For to make an assertion about anything is to deny its contrary, and to propose a theory or view about anything is to reject alternative views. But to label all judgments, all proposing of theories and hypotheses, all expressions of opinion, as exclusivist would be to empty the term of any useful meaning.

Some critics, such as Philip Almond and Christopher Sinkinson have attempted to portray Hick’s view as presuming an almost omniscient vantage point or “cosmic vantage point” from

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92 Hick, The Rainbow, 42-43. To say it yet another way, “You have to face up to the fact that no hypothesis about the relation between religions—unless it simply affirms the truth of one and the falsity of the rest—is going to be congruent with the belief-system of one of them to the exclusion of the others. To complain about this is simply to turn one’s back on the whole project of a religious interpretation of religion in its wide variety of forms. One cannot seek such a comprehensive interpretation and then disqualify any proposal that doesn’t simply replicate the particular doctrines of one’s own tradition.” Hick, The Rainbow, 48.

93 Hick, The Rainbow, 45. This is the one place where I found the response of Hick inferior to others who have defended him, for Sumner B. Twiss has a much more eloquent response to this criticism. Twiss argues that Netland is either confusing the difference between the fallacy of descriptive reduction, by which one is simply trying to describe the object of inquiry on its own terms but fails to do so, and the practice (not a fallacy) of explanatory reduction by which one describes the object of inquiry “in terms of some higher-order scheme, framework, or theory in the effort to arrive at the best explanation of the belief or practice. … Though task 2 presupposes the achievement of task 1, they are distinct, and, suggests [Wayne] Proudfoot, the failure to distinguish between” these two types of interpretation “results in the overly parochial and protective view that an explanatory account of a belief or practice must be restricted to the perspective and terms of the subject or culture” and “block[s] genuine inquiry and attempts at explanation and theory from a perspective different from that of a subject or culture.” Twiss, “The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism,” 75. He concludes that if Netland is accusing Hick of explanatory inadequacy (rather than descriptive inadequacy or “descriptive reduction”) “because of a supposed failure to adopt the categories of traditions as being truly explanatory and to use instead those of another theory or framework, then Netland’s criticism itself may suffer from a problem of its own—namely, the undue imposition of an unreasonable explanatory or theoretic requirement.” Ibid., 75ff.


which to see what all religions do not see—namely, that each of them are all in touch with the same infinite reality in different finite ways. This criticism originates from the popular use of the elephant parable. The parable tells a story about the blind men who were investigating an elephant. Each blind man was touching a different part of the elephant, and so each proposed their theory as to what the object of inquiry was based on their limited vantage point (the blind man touching the trunk thinks it is a snake, the one touching the elephants leg thinks it is a tree, etc.). The point of the pluralist elephant parable is that all religions are in touch with the same reality even though their claims about it might contradict each other. Although Hick never used this parable as an argument for his position, critics love to use this parable as an illustration of what they think Hick’s pluralist hypothesis amounts to, and as a way to argue against it. The problem with Hick’s view, illustrated by the parable, is that it presumes the vantage point of someone who can see blind men groping about, each mistaken about the ultimate nature of the object of inquiry. It makes (so they claim) Hick out to be guilty of the ultimate hubris of thinking of world religions as blind men groping about and himself as the one who can see. Transposed to the analogous level of religious pluralism, the man who can see the blind men groping as well as the elephant would be equivalent to an almost omniscient or transcendent vantage point from which to see what all other religions fail to see.

The problem with this criticism is that the elephant parable is not well suited to illustrate the nature of Hick’s thesis for several reasons. He does not claim to “see” the elephant while the blind men grope, but claims that nobody can see the elephant. The Real an sich (in itself) cannot be known by any finite human perspective (including Hick’s). The elephant must be postulated once all the blind men realize they are dogmatically contradicting each other.97 It would be analogous to one of them saying: “Let’s not be so dogmatic guys; after all, we are all blind men groping about. Maybe each of us is touching a different aspect of the same object but don’t have the category to know what it is!” Hick’s hypothesis is just that—a hypothesis of a blind man trying to propose the best way to understand religious pluralism.98 It is arrived at inductively, not from some quasi-omniscience or transcendent vantage point.99

Conclusion

The case and defense made by Hick for pluralism is philosophically remarkable and has turned many critics into believers, yet he recognized that we generally commit ourselves to views based on our experience or sociological predicament apart from clearly articulated

97 By now one can see how many criticisms are based on the misunderstanding of Hick’s hypothesis as a hypothesis arrived at inductively and proposed as a best explanation or working hypothesis rather than a dogmatic claim to absolute knowledge.

98 And furthermore, “when a Muslim speaks of Allah the Qur’anic revealer, and a Hindu speaks of Brahman as the limitless transpersonal consciousness, they are not referring to two parts of reality [as in the parable] but to two ways in which the limitless divine reality has been thought and experienced by different human mentalities…” Hick, Problems, 96.

arguments. “Indeed our deepest convictions do not usually really depend upon the arguments that we produce to defend them” and adherents of a particular religious tradition typically assume the superiority of their own tradition and are not swayed by “contrary evidences and arguments.” When minds change on weighty matters of religion and worldview, seldom are such changes the results of “knock-down” arguments. Furthermore, in a move parallel to his doctrine of cosmic ambiguity, Hick argues that making cases for certain views using Scripture is always inconclusive because when contrary positions take their justification from biblical sources they inevitably are using Scripture selectively. Although Hick deferred his opinions about biblical teaching to the consensus of biblical scholars, he also granted that biblical research always reflects the wider theological positions of the researchers. “If you want biblical confirmation for a conservative position, you can find it, and if you want biblical confirmation for a more liberal position you can find that.”

This is admittedly disconcerting if we had thought that we can settle our theological problems from the Bible. But the situation is really the other way round: we all use the Bible selectively (whether consciously or not) in the light of our theological outlook. … [I]n the end I think the situation is that it’s possible to fit the New Testament evidence into both a conservative and a liberal theological picture. We can’t finally establish either from the texts, though we can use the texts to confirm them. I know that for some people this is difficult to accept, but nevertheless it seems to be the case.

We might say this doctrine of biblical ambiguity complements quite well his doctrine of cosmic ambiguity, and further confirms his concession that the philosopher Immanuel Kant has indeed been the most significant influence on Hick’s own thought, for both doctrines of ambiguity underscore the decisive contribution of the human’s peculiarity (the innate categories of the human mind, the schemas of thought supplied by one’s culture, the sociological predicament which supplies one’s motive for perceiving in one way rather than another, etc.) to her object of inquiry.

Hick’s facing of the controversial aspects of the questions surrounding religious pluralism head-on with such frankness is certainly admirable. The adoption of his pluralist hypothesis (as we have seen) has major consequences for any theology of religions, for it demands a jettisoning of any doctrines which imply superiority—which would apply to the Roman Catholic “fulfillment” theology just as much as the evangelical exclusivist theology, for a fulfillment theology is a one-way fulfillment theology where the best that other religions have to offer are incomplete versions of truths only fulfilled most fully in Christianity. There is a

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100 Hick, The Rainbow, 7-8.

101 “But it must be said that these are questions which the New Testament scholars will probably debate among themselves until the end of time. And I think you will notice that their interpretations are invariably correlated with their wider theological positions.” Hick, The Rainbow, 96.

102 Hick, The Rainbow, 96.

103 Hick, The Rainbow, 96-98.

104 See Paul Hedges, Preparation and Fulfillment: A History and Study of Fulfillment Theology in Modern British Thought (New York: NY: Peter Lang, 2002). Hedges argues that such one-way fulfillment theology is
certain exceptional clarity and wit in the midst of his rigorous argumentation that, in spite of accusations of incoherency and hubris, could be “experienced-as” the marks of genius and humility.\textsuperscript{105}

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\textsuperscript{105} He regretfully had to waste much time clarifying his views for those who were constantly distorting them. Since he was a critic of non-realist use of religious language, it would have been most helpful if he had devoted an entire book exposing and counter-arguing the philosophical foundations of naturalism and a non-realist use of religious language. His lack of persistent and direct engagement with secular theories, though understandable, is regrettable in this regard. One assumes this is at least partly why, in spite of the direct relevancy of his philosophy for modern debates about interpretations of religion, his name is often completely missing from the more secular discussion (not so much as a footnote!). E.g. Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein, eds. \textit{Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives} (Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000).


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