

The Philosopher of Pluralism:
An Examination of John Hick's Pluralist Hypothesis

An honors thesis submitted for consideration of the Washington and Lee Department of Religion by:

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this project.

pledged: 

“The lamps are different, but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond.”

--Jalaludin Rumi

THESIS ABSTRACT:

An innovative philosopher of religion and renowned theologian, John Hick is deeply concerned with the manifold issues surrounding the modern inter-religious dialogue. Recognizing both the validity of human thought and experience and the spiritual depth available through diverse religious traditions, his work has been hugely significant in the establishment and recognition of a pluralist hypothesis. In an effort to make his modern pluralist interpretation of religion readily accessible to an increasingly scientific public, he writes extensively on the value of inter-faith discussions and understanding. Evolving from his initial Christocentric dialogical style into an enlightened advocate of religious pluralism and discursive diversity over the decades, Hick champions a ubiquitous form of spirituality manifest through limitless variety of humanly-conceived forms: its application toward a unifying religious experience has immense and exciting possibility in contemporary application.

Therefore, it is important for any serious scholar of Hick to understand fully his intellectual development, from his ministerial training and initial Christian inclusivism, to the present, less polarizing, dialogical form of pluralism arrived at through the subjectivity of Kantian epistemology. What were his most controversial statements and how has he sought to resolve them through his present philosophy? How far has he really moved from this initial viewpoint and does he retain validity as a serious scholar? Through thoughtful attention to the phenomenological, epistemological, and criteriological forces which have impacted his thought, one can more fully appreciate the dialogical breadth of pluralism in its present form. Indeed, as Hick actively incorporates material and ideology from a multiplicity of traditions, he reconciles questions of universality versus particularity in a volatile and changing international landscape in an effort to realize an equitable and dialogic goal for all of mankind.

Introduction to John Hick: Religious Interpretation, Definition and Location in the
Modern World

There is, throughout the range of human cognitive schemata, a particular existential awareness through which the individual is sensitive to a reality that transcends the present environment, an alternate understanding to naturalism which evokes a response within the individual of transcendent experiential magnitude: religion. A complex human principle, religion is defined as the “belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe,” “a set of beliefs, values, and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader,” and “a cause, principle, or activity pursued with zeal or conscientious devotion.”¹ Characterized variously as such, religion is one of the most fundamental tenets of human civilization: an aspect of humanity often regarded as the highest form of philosophical expression and purest form of consciousness available to mankind.

There are, however, multiple theories of religion by which human religiosity is understood as a psychological or sociological creation; a product of cultural conditions and inherent optimism. And yet human beings persist in religious activities and awareness, living and dying with regard to particularly oriented belief systems. Religion cannot be ignored; it cannot be dismissed.

John Hick, renowned scholar and philosopher of religion, stands at the forefront of this contemporary religious discussion or plurality. Practicing a self-described “religious interpretation of religion,” Hick has developed a pluralist hypothesis according

¹ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of Idioms.*

to which seemingly disparate religious understandings are, in a sense, reconciled even as conceptual distinctions and unique characteristics are maintained, even cultivated. A polemical religious philosopher, he debuted in the mid-twentieth century and has since extended his pluralist hypothesis throughout the heterogeneous body of world religion. Hick accomplishes this definition through a careful philosophical expansion into an intercultural, inter-religious realm—a diverse arena in which he encountered complications of language, knowledge, experience and classification.

Accordingly, he has developed his hypothesis of pluralism with special attention to these issues of religious epistemology, phenomenology and criteriology. Hick utilizes a system of religious *epistemology* through which the limits of human cognitive ability are recognized, carefully delineating the complex issues surrounding ethics, meaning and ambiguity; rationality, knowledge and religious belief. This Kantian epistemology is integrally related to Hick's *phenomenological* understanding of religion, the primary method through which religious experience is understood and impacted via mysticism and transformative soteriological teachings. *Criteriology*, the third fundamental aspect of Hick's pluralist hypothesis, is similarly based upon certain unitive ethics, acknowledging the problems of conflicting truth-claims, the possibility of "eschatological verification" and various universal ambiguities.

Thus establishing a dialectical mode of religious pluralism through which both particularity and commonality can be achieved, John Hick has developed a thoughtful and attentive hypothesis of religious awareness. His philosophy has contributed to many contemporary ecumenical and inter-religious discussions, aiding in the recognition and implementation of dialogue and cooperation among seemingly disparate communities. In

this hopeful spirit Hick continues to teach today, participating in pluralist discussion through various groups and organizations and writing prolifically. Throughout his work Hick promotes a contemporary, non-confessional understanding of religion—of religiosity— through the application of pluralism. Hick encourages within his readers a recognition and *appreciation* of the religious differences of mankind: the thoughtful and attentive application of Hick's pluralist hypothesis has great potential in the realm of modern international politics and global community.

Dynamism Among Division: the Debut of Hick

Something revolutionary is happening within modern spirituality and religion. The international socio-political climate is changing irrevocably and individuals are seeking to extract a deeper sense of meaning and purpose from life, earnestly striving for peace and security as disease and natural disaster rage across a global backdrop of poverty and violence. Comprehensive socio-political issues such as these are increasingly complicating the fragile international political dynamic, inspiring positive humanitarian cooperation among disparate groups and compelling individuals and governments to collaborate in the creation of some viable solution in the face of this common peril. Attention is being directed towards a more fruitful and pragmatic application of these humanitarian principles upon an ever-changing landscape of strife and turmoil: morality, ethics and mutuality are paramount in this global, multi-cultural conversation.

This collaborative enterprise, however, cannot ultimately succeed without some degree of conflict resolution and the recognition and subsequent *realization* of the unity present among the peoples of the world. But to what extent is such harmony possible? One of the most significant impediments with regard to the practical realization of this international effort *at* community lies in the realm of religion. According to 2005 estimates by the World Population Bureau, there are approximately 6.4 billion people on the earth today, the majority of which practice some form of religion.² Each of these multiform traditions to which these billions belong has its own unique vocabulary and precise conceptual organization—a system oftentimes in conflict with others. Religious belief frequently shapes the provisional response and conceptual understanding of many persons and groups with regard to contemporary world crises. The disparity among these variant belief structures often leads to political and ideological conflicts; clashes which only serve to defeat the very collaboration which they inspired.

Dialogue, it would seem, is imperative. But questions remain: How can a clear and open channel of communication be realized in such a tempestuous setting? And what of historical and socio-cultural predispositions toward adversity? Is “religion” the answer? Though religion frequently provides individuals and communities with an optimistic understanding of existence, can it perform the same function for humanity as a whole?

One of the most revolutionary and innovative religious philosophers participating in this search for a common ground upon which competing worldviews can peaceably meet and (hopefully) concur is John Hick. Hick’s writing has influenced an entire

² www.prb.org

generation of religious philosophers and social theologians, bringing important questions regarding the nature, feasibility and the serious repercussions of religious dialogue to the forefront of interreligious and socio-political discussion. “The philosophy of religion proper,” he writes, “is the philosophy of religion *globally*, not just of one particular tradition.”³ A leading advocate of religious pluralism, Hick seeks to identify and expound upon those topics in religious philosophy which frequently perplex individuals.

Reflecting in an interview, he muses

probably the easiest and most productive way for religious people of different traditions to get together is over concrete problems – the problems of the environment, of peace, of poverty— the problems of the world, because they are common to all human beings... You find that different ideas spring up from different sources, (and) so I think that is quite possibly the most valuable thing at the moment... If you could get people of many faiths together specifically to concentrate on a particular human problem, that would certainly be of enormous value.⁴

Focusing upon questions and issues (such as these) which often arise in religious debate, Hick serves as vice president in the World Congress of Faiths and is incredibly active among many other interfaith organizations. Through social action and philosophical discourse, he plays an integral part in the real-world actualization of a pluralist ideology, aiding in the implementation of many progressive and inter-faith philanthropic projects, aiding in the development of a form of situational dialogue based in religious plurality and ideological relativity.

Attending to such polemical topics as the rationality of faith, the epistemology of God, and the tension between conflicting truth claims, Hick has created a compelling thesis through which human socio-religious interaction can effectively take place. His foundational paradigm is based upon elements both internal and external to particular

³ Hick, *Autobiography*, p. 311. (emphasis added)

⁴ <http://www.interfaithstudies.org/interfaith/hicktypes.html>

conceptions of religion. Indeed, as he incorporates concepts from a multiplicity of traditions, he actively reconciles questions of universality versus particularity with regard to our capricious international landscape. Such is his effort to encourage an equitable, dialogic goal of pragmatic religious pluralism within contemporary society. Through thoughtful attention to the epistemological, phenomenological, and criteriological⁵ concepts that have influenced Hick's thought, one can more fully appreciate the dialogical breadth which has marked his academic career: the continuity and change of Hick's understanding of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue.

From Conversion to Heresy: the Evolution of John Hick

The development of Hick's philosophy has not been a straightforward endeavor, however. "Real philosophers," he reflects, "...are born, not made, and ...I was born one."⁶ An intelligent and painfully shy child, Hick spent his formative years in boarding schools at various places across Great Britain. A strained relationship with his father made home an impractical choice for him, and the child sought relief in academia.⁷ Eventually, a student of law at what is now the University of Hull, Hick attended lectures by eminent philosopher T.E. Jessop, cultivating his innate "philosophical bent"⁸ through

⁵ These terms will be examined in depth regarding their importance to Hick's philosophy below, though *epistemology* can be thought of as the study of knowledge; *phenomenology* as the study of experience; and *criteriology* as that of standards of measure, or basic criteria.

⁶ *Autobiography*, p. 70.

⁷ Hick, John. *An Autobiography*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25. Gavin D'Costa criticizes Hick's early philosophical approach to religion, drawing attention to Hick's adolescent recollection of reading *Principles of Theosophy*. Hick rejects the theosophical approach in *God Has Many Names* (1980), describing it as being "too tidy and impersonal" (p. 2), and though he disagrees with its validity, he does recognize it as a religio-philosophical possibility for some.

extra-curricular interests such as these. Though intensely skeptical of Christian dogma from an early age, "it was at Hull," Hick recalls, "that I experienced a powerful evangelical conversion to fundamentalist Christianity."⁹ Indeed, "for several days," he writes,

I was in a state of intense mental and emotional turmoil, during which I became increasingly aware of a higher truth and greater reality pressing in upon me and claiming my recognition and response... The reality that was pressing in upon me was not only awesomely demanding... but also irresistibly attractive, and I entered with great joy and excitement in the world of Christian faith.¹⁰

This adoption of evangelical principles did nothing to squelch Hick's seemingly insatiable desire toward philosophical inquiry. Soon abandoning his legal studies, he began to pursue earnestly those religious and philosophical interests which he had cultivated throughout his life, drawn principally to those forms of religious expression outside of the Christian realm. In 1940 he published "On the Importance of Heresy," an essay in the University of Hull student journal in which he defined heresy as "that salutary state of mind in which everything is seen as alive and mysterious and worth looking at"¹¹—a definition which bears consistently with his later writings as well.

⁹Hick writes of this experience that Jeffreys "laid his hands on my head. [And] I immediately felt a strong physical effect, like an electric shock except that it was not a sharp jolt but a pervasive sensation spreading down through my body. I was in a flood of tears.... Although people who have never experienced such things pooh-pooh them I am in doubt that there are individuals through whom a real psychic force of some kind flows." (p. 27) This is an important instance in the formulation of Hick's defense of the "reality" of extra-sensory perception and other psychic phenomena. Indeed, his mother, Aileen, believed herself to possess certain psychic powers, including the ability to heal. (For more on this, see pp. 29-32 in Hick's *Autobiography*.)

¹⁰ This personal experience, as quoted from his private journals in Hick's autobiography, p. 33, bears significantly upon his discussion of religious phenomenology, to be discussed later.

¹¹ Quoted in his autobiography, p. 33.

“Clearly,” he recalls of this particular mode of youthful dis-satisfaction, “I was in a religiously questioning and open state.”¹²

A conscientious objector to World War II, Hick nonetheless served in the medical unit during the war, returning to England a changed man: increasingly practical and less idealistic, he embarked on a rigorous academic journey and managed to complete his doctoral dissertation at Oxford a few years later.¹³ Juggling these intellectual pursuits with a family life, he was soon formally ordained as a Presbyterian minister—a direct result of his conversion experience at Hull in the evangelical Presbyterian student body. Even as a minister in Belford, though, Hick could not constrain his intellectual appetites and he continued to examine religions outside of Christianity, thoughtfully reflecting upon inherent salvific potential, experiential validity and their particular religious philosophies.¹⁴

Hick gained significant recognition within the academic world as a result of such revolutionary philosophical exposition of religion. His prolific writings sparked disagreement within many academic circles. Accepting positions at Cornell and Princeton,¹⁵ and later at Cambridge and Birmingham, his work became the polemical topic of much debate within philosophical and religious scholarship. Upon being hired as professor of “Christian philosophy” at Princeton Seminary, Hick ironically insisted there

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hick described his dissertation later as “completely bogus!” (*Autobiography*, p. 73.) Hick later clarified those elements of his thesis which he found to be problematic, developing the text into his 1957 work, *Faith and Knowledge*.

¹⁴ Hick was labeled as recently as 1992 as an “especially problematic... apostate evangelical” for these proto-pluralist writings. For more on this moniker, see Douglas Jacobsen and Frederick Schmidt, “Behind Orthodoxy and Beyond It: Recent Developments in Evangelical Christology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 45, p. 519.

¹⁵ It was while at Princeton that Hick’s ministerial title was rescinded by the Presbyterian Church for his statements pertaining to his dis-belief in the literal interpretation of much of the Bible, including Genesis, predestination and the virgin birth of Jesus—the disagreement to which Hick ironically refers to as his “ridiculous affair with the Virgin Mary” (see Hick’s *Autobiography*, p. 124).

was no such thing. "There is no such subject! There are Christian philosophers but no Christian philosophy," he announced in his controversial inaugural lecture.¹⁶ Indeed, Hick sought to delineate a professorial identity outside of any *specific* religion or doctrinal constraint, remaining comfortable in his location in the broader religious and philosophical spectrum.

Faith and Knowledge in Birmingham: the Intellectual Development of Hick

In 1967 Dr. Hick was appointed to the H.G.I. Wood chair in the philosophy of religion at Birmingham University in England. And it was here, in the culturally-rich milieu of Handsworth, Birmingham, that Hick's most important intellectual development occurred. A burgeoning and vibrant melting pot, Birmingham warmly received Punjabi Sikhs, Pakistani Muslims and Gujarati Hindus, among other European and African immigrants.¹⁷ Finding himself in the midst of a profoundly diverse community, Hick began to participate in a heterogeneous spirituality very different from that form of evangelical Christianity in which he found solace for so many years in the Presbyterian Church: he embraced a new-found conceptual relativity and religiosity.¹⁸ A religious understanding extremely contrary to that traditional, conservative form of Christianity to which he had been formally accustomed, Hick's faith began to develop exponentially in

¹⁶ As quoted in his autobiography, p. 122.

¹⁷ Stetson, p. 8. This influx of immigration (particularly from the Indian subcontinent) was the result of the end of centuries of British colonialism. Newly released from the strangles of imperial dominance, these individuals sought the opportunities afforded by a more "traditional" British society.

¹⁸ Hick's devotion to the Presbyterian Church was always somewhat questionable: "I chose the Presbyterian Church," he writes, "simply because my evangelical friends were in it." (*Autobiography*, p. 78).

such a pluralistic environment: consequently, he sought to integrate and engage those diverse traditions with which he was now in contact and moved away from his Christian-confessional past.

To his dismay Hick observed overt religious indoctrination within the Birmingham public school system through a stringent “Religious Education” program—a limited parochial curriculum which took no notice of the cultural and religious diversity within the classroom, let alone the community-at-large. A member of the locally-based AFFOR (All Faiths for One Race, an ecumenical group dedicated to promoting social harmony),¹⁹ Hick labored to remove this “myopic” indoctrination from the public curriculum: an absolutist understanding of religion—let alone Christianity—he figured, could not be adequate. He regarded it as a travesty that the government was promoting such conservatism in the education of the nation’s vibrant youth. Divergent religious activities which occupied devotees of differing faiths were equally-valid expressions of spirituality as those in which he participated as a member of the Evangelical Church,²⁰ he argued. Indeed, the various forms of religious involvement and faith-oriented practice seemed to be responses to a similar catalyst. From this initial breakthrough—dissenting drastically from established religious tradition—Hick began to examine the singular phenomenon of religion in all of its worldly manifestations.

Prior to this immersion in the dynamic religiosity of Birmingham in the 1950s, Hick had been an adherent to the classically-doctrinaire attitude of confessional Christianity.²¹ His Presbyterian attitude toward other religions centered upon the

¹⁹ Stetson, p. 8.

²⁰ Mathis, p. 69.

²¹ Though he was often associated with various philosophers of Christian exclusivism, Hick very early recognized the religious possibilities of other, non-Christian religions as an inclusivist—though he held

individual's "acceptance of the absolute authority of scripture, and of such doctrines as the virgin birth of Christ and of salvation being dependent on accepting Christ as one's personal saviour."²² His first major work, *Faith and Knowledge: A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge*, was published in 1957, a culmination of Hick's dialogic efforts from within the Christian tradition. Stimulating and thought-provoking, *Faith and Knowledge* is nonetheless characterized by a clear Christocentric tone, only nominally addressing concerns of other religious traditions, and even then always from within the limited terminological construct of specifically (Protestant) Christian vocabulary. Philosophers of the mid-twentieth century were intensely skeptical of Hick's rational (inclusivist) investigation of *Christianity* and spiritual justification of the Christian God found in the text. He struggled with particularizing terminology and his rational justification of religion was problematic for many. Paul Badham notes in his essay "Profile: John Hick" that Hick felt it necessary to "defend the rationality of religious believing as a legitimate way of understanding reality"²³ in response to naturalist critics.

Thus in order to accommodate a *religious* understanding of the complex reality he faced in Birmingham, Hick drew upon the Kantian notion of "epistemic distance," noting that we— as finite human beings— are unable to access the infinite realm of the Real: God, *Ein Sof* and Brahma continually elude our cognitive apprehension, despite our efforts to attain "true knowledge." None of the various arguments for the existence of

Christianity as the preferred form of religious worship and practice. Hick is close friends with traditionally-conservative Christian theologian Richard Swineburne of Oxford, and still refers to him as an incredible influence, even today. On his Christocentric argument, Hick writes that "nevertheless... I have used it several times very profitably as a basis for discussion... [and] I have again criticized it elsewhere" (*Autobiography*, 311).

²² Badham, "Profile," p. 25.

²³ Badham, "Profile," p. 26.

“God” can successfully establish “God” *as fact*. However, the rationality of our unique experience of the Real must not be dismissed, Hick argues: differing human experience constitutes our varied modes of knowing—forms of which cannot be ignored.

Answering critics such as Anthony Flew, among others, Hick developed his theory of “eschatological verification,” re-examining the rationalist explanation through which he sought to explain human religious awareness. Based in a sort of logical empiricism, the discussion eschatological verification emphasizes that there has yet to be formulated a universally-satisfactory criterion for religious and theistic verification. Recalling Herbert Feigl’s argument of ‘confirmability-in-principle,’²⁴ Hick’s notion of eschatological verification rests heavily upon temporarily non-verifiable assertions, that the individual will simply “find out later,” including a problematic theory of replication in lieu of reincarnation or resurrection upon death. Christian soteriology (as presented within the scriptures) will, according to Hick, “either be verified, if eternal life is real, or falsified if it isn’t”²⁵: a faith-based “delayed gratification” of sorts. Such a post-mortem epistemological argument proved unacceptable to many naturalist philosophers of the decade. Their subsequent challenges to Hick’s philosophy of rationality and belief have greatly contributed to his development throughout his academic career.²⁶

Indeed, in the following years Hick continued to re-shape his pluralist argument to address more directly those concerns raised by critics. Hick used his philosophical writings to respond to critical inquiries, and was thus able to develop more fully his pluralist theory of religion—a theory with which he could reconcile the microcosm of

²⁴ For more on this idea, see Hick’s *Disputed Questions*, p. 110-116.

²⁵ Badham, “Profile,” p. 28.

²⁶ Individuals such as D’Costa, John Cobb Jr., Wolfhart Pannenberg, J.A. DiNoia, among others, found (and still do find) Hick’s pluralist philosophy incredibly problematic.

Birmingham with the international religious spectrum, attending not only to the particular cultural phenomena in play, but individual religious configurations as well. These later titles include *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions* (1974), *Death and Eternal Life* (1976), *God Has Many Names* (1982), *Why Believe in God?* (1983), *Evil and the God of Love* (1985), and *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987), among others. It is important to note, as Badham observes, although Hick has significantly adjusted his position from the initial inclusivist restraints of Christian doctrinal authority, he has never once “doubted the reality of the encounter with the transcendent Reality which lay at the heart of the [religious] experience itself.”²⁷

It was in this spirit that Hick expanded his fundamental understanding of pluralism, noting that religion is a *human creation* developed in *response* to a particular *experience* of the divine Real.²⁸ Religion, as Hick defines it, is a personal, though culturally-informed configuration of attitude and behavior which “centres upon an awareness of and a response to a reality that transcends ourselves and our world, whether the ‘direction’ of transcendence be beyond or within or both.”²⁹ This characterization admits the *a priori* existence and reality of an “intentional object of religious thought and experience.”³⁰ However, it is important to note that such a basic definition of “religion” also serves to conceptualize those worldviews *absent* of a theistic element. Indeed, Hick has placed great effort into accommodating those worldviews and secular ideologies

²⁷ Badham, “Profile,” p. 25.

²⁸ He writes that “it is (his) basic conviction that human religious experience is not totally a projection but is also at the same time, in very varying degrees, a response to reality” (quoted in response to Michael Goulder’s “naturalistic assumption... [of religion as] purely imaginative projection”; *Autobiography*, 153). Hick’s definition of “the Real” is to be further discussed below.

²⁹ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

which do not include any sort of theistic figure— those such as Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism and Communism, among others.³¹

Recognizing those problems generated by any form of particularizing terminology, Hick has chosen to conceptualize the primary element of his religious hypothesis as simply “the Real.” Observing in his 1989 opus, *An Interpretation of Religion*, he writes

Any discussion of religion in its plurality of forms is inevitably beset by problems of terminology. *Each tradition has its own vocabulary, expressing its own system of concepts; and whilst these overlap with those of other traditions, so that there are all manner of correspondences, parallels, analogies and structural similarities, yet each set of terms is only fully at home in its own particular linguistic environment.* We have very little in the way of a tradition-neutral religious vocabulary. Accordingly, we have to improvise...³²

Simple translation of the religiously-specific *sunyata*³³ or *al-Haqq*³⁴ is inadequate and grossly detrimental to the faith in which they are embedded, Hick argues: that which particularizes a religion need not suffer diminution through an imperfect permutation. Truly improvising then he has chosen to refer to “the Real” throughout the pluralist enterprise, at once signifying everything and nothing for the religious philosopher.³⁵ It is

³¹ Hick has put great effort in accommodating perspectives that do not recognize a theistic principle. Devoting a significant portion of his autobiography to his sabbatical experience of 1974, a time during which he spent among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, he recalls the powerful dialogue in which he participated with members of the local Buddhist community. Indeed, Hick supports the basic Buddhist conception of rebirth, among other fundamentally Buddhist ideas—a more complete discussion of which can be found in his recent book, *The Fifth Dimension* (2000).

³² *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 9. (emphasis added)

³³ A principle tenet of Mahayana Buddhism in which *things* – in their perceived, material existence — are recognized as being ultimately empty, neither existent nor non-existent.

³⁴ Islamic conception of the infinite facet of Allah, a facet of being in which humans will never be able to come into direct contact due to imperfection and limited reality. This understanding is closely related to the Kantian notion of the phenomenon and noumenon, and Hick’s discussion of the personae and impersonae of divinity (for a more complete discussion of these ideas, see below).

³⁵ With regard to his re-naming of “God,” Hick writes: “Such terms as the Real, the Ultimate, Ultimate Reality are commonly used to refer to this supposed *ne plus ultra*. None of them will suit everybody’s

the ubiquitous, transcendent phenomenon to which a religion speaks that is the focus of religious worship—not the specific name toward which religious practice may be directed.

And yet even through this linguistic and conceptual accommodation (or perhaps as a result of it), Hick still faces complicated issues of semantics related to his philosophy. As a result he is constantly attempting to reconcile various issues of terminology and cultural-relativism which pertain to his endeavor. Discussing the profound ineffability of religious experience from within the trans-cultural context (as opposed to the specifically religious), Hick has formalized his creative and responsive hypothesis of pluralism. Thoroughly aware of and attentive to critical inquiry, as he writes in 1986, he is incredibly “grateful for [such] critical queries and disagreements,”³⁶ as they allow him to continue his scholarly maturation. Indeed, his philosophy of religion has become incredibly complex throughout Hick’s intellectual evolution: a product of decades of responsive enumeration among critics and religious philosophers. In order to more fully understand Hick’s unique theory of pluralism it is necessary, in a sense, to *trisection* his philosophy, examining the three most important characteristics of his thought in light of current pluralist discourse— those being the epistemological, phenomenological and criteriological elements of Hick’s “trans-categorical”³⁷ philosophical pilgrimage.

linguistic taste. Accepting this, I propose, arbitrarily, to speak of the Real...” (from Hick’s “The Real and Its Personae and Impersonae”)

³⁶ Hick, “Response” in Part XI of *Concepts of the Ultimate*, ed. Linda J. Tessier (1989), p. 171.

³⁷ A term taken from Hick’s March 2000 article, “Ineffability,” (to be discussed further in detail), the full text of which appears in *Religious Studies*, 36:1: pp. 35-42.

Pluralist Epistemology: A Conversation Between Kant, Hick, and the Real

One of the most fundamental aspects of Hick's pluralist hypothesis is its deep attachment to the revolutionary philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). And while Hick's thought is intimately related to both Eastern and Western thought, he borrows frequently from Kantian aesthetics and epistemology. "I hold the greatest single achievement in the history of philosophy to be Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal,"³⁸ he writes in his autobiography. Writing in response to fellow Kantian philosopher Brian Magee, Hick continues:

No one who understands the central doctrines of the world's leading religions ought to have any difficulty in understanding (Kant's) idea... that 'reality exists independently of all possible experience,' and the existence of the transcendental world, a part of reality that is not the empirical world.³⁹

Indeed, Hick has grounded some of the most fundamental tenets of his pluralist hypothesis upon the Kantian distinction between the phenomenon and noumenon, and the person-centered "Copernican Revolution" that followed from it. Recognizing the individual mind as a *subjective* (though necessary) component of cognition and the intrinsically limited nature of human experience, Hick developed his pluralist epistemology according to the preceding Kantian ideas. "For the meaning of an object or situation is its perceived (*or misperceived*) character such that to perceive it as having that character is to be in a distinctive dispositional state in relation to it,"⁴⁰ Hick writes. He maintains that humankind cannot directly experience the universe as it exists

³⁸ *Autobiography*, p. 68-69.

³⁹ From Hick's personal records of a conversation with Magee, as quoted in his autobiography, p. 69.

⁴⁰ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 12. (emphasis added)

independently in itself due to our inherent cognitive limits.⁴¹ Thus we must be content to acknowledge a fundamental ambiguity intrinsic to the cosmic structure—an ambiguity which extends itself beyond traditional human capacity of thought and language. Any statements regarding the Real, therefore, are unavoidably partial and mediated through inadequate conceptual structures: we can overcome neither our subjective “dispositional relation,” nor our epistemic distance from that toward which we direct religious worship and devotion.

Differentiating those definitive statements which exhibit *specific* characterization (as opposed to those statements which refer to simply an existent force absent of any particularity), Hick mounts his rationalized argument in favor of religious knowledge despite these inherent ambiguities. His pluralist epistemology is premised upon a differentiation of what he describes as the “substantial” and “formal” attributes pertaining to the Real. *Substantial attributes*—those which denote a specific quality of being such as kindness, benevolence or omnipotence—are impossible for human beings to fully comprehend with regard to the Real: we simply cannot know. Conversely, *formal attributes* are those qualities that provide “nothing significant... concerning the intrinsic nature of (the Real).”⁴² Such categorically empty statements are in Hick’s words “trivial... [and] inconsequential”⁴³ in their non-specificity. Both definitions, however, are important with regard to Hick’s rational justification of religious knowledge.

Indeed, if human knowledge is dependent upon the location of meaning in or regarding certain subjects and objects, this meaning must be assigned prior to the

⁴¹ This idea reflects Hick’s differential conceptualization of the *Real* and the *Real an sich*, which will be discussed later.

⁴² Hick, “Ineffability.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*

acquisition or possible realization of knowledge. Also, it must be a statement of knowledgibility and definite *substance*. This human search for definitive meaning—for *knowledge*— is one of the fundamental struggles of many scholars. Elusive, transitory and predominantly relative, “meaning” is a key element in cross-cultural human dialogue. For Hick it “is the most general characteristic of conscious experience as such... [Meaning is] always *for*, or in relation to, a consciousness or a community of consciousness.”⁴⁴ Again, it is dispositional and relative due to the inherent ambiguity of the universe; there is no definitive *teleos*, nor can any ultimate generality be discerned.

However, in a philosophical effort to form a coherent epistemological grasp upon the implications of this-worldly existence and reality, Hick has chosen to differentiate between various forms of meaning in his philosophy, denoting fundamental divergences among natural, aesthetic, socio-ethical and religious meaning in the universe. For instance, he defines *aesthetic meaning* as “the enjoyment of something as though it constituted a universe to which the experiencer is not causally linked... [The subject] ceases to be conscious of the object as something affecting one’s own dispositional state.”⁴⁵ Aesthetic meaning is a purely subjective and non-practical form of knowledge; however, this does not detract from its merit or contemplative value. Art and poetry are products of such aesthetic knowledge, as individual taste and disposition with regard to these objects vary greatly across the broad spectrum of human nature and creativity.

Another form of meaning which Hick addresses through his discussion of epistemology is that to which he refers as *socio-ethical meaning*: human responsive

⁴⁴ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 130-131.

⁴⁵ Such transformation of normal human consciousness frequently occurs under the use of certain drugs, through which the “practical consciousness is suspended and one simply enjoys colours, shapes, tastes, sensations, movements, spatial and temporal relationships for their own sake.” (*Ibid*, p. 151.)

awareness that arises from external affectation, presumably by another being, a realization through which the individual becomes aware of the independent existence of another. Of this socio-ethical regard among persons, Hick writes that

...we have no direct cognition of another centre of consciousness, but we experience as in the way which has given rise to and is reciprocally supported and maintained by the language of the personal.⁴⁶

An inherent characteristic of personal existence, or “mutuality” as Hick defines it, socio-ethical meaning is a human construct purely dependent upon our informed intent and basic moral recognition of others.

Meaning, however, can be extrapolated from outside of the social realm as well. *Natural meaning*, Hick claims, is a specific result of the awareness and physiological responsiveness of our human sensory and nervous systems to certain stimuli. We are thereby limited in our recognitional capacity for meaning to that which occurs within or impacts upon our personal consciousness. One cannot “experience the unexperienced... [for] we can never compare the world as it appears in consciousness with the postulated world as it exists independently of its impacts upon [the individual].”⁴⁷ Humans, Hick argues—unable to supersede this epistemological gap—are cognizant of merely *one level* of meaning, the realization of which is limited in scope and fallibility.⁴⁸ Any statement of substantial attribute must be understood as metaphorical, useful only to give

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 147. This personally-dependent definition of meaning can be illustrated through the various religious approximations of the “Golden Rule.” There is a seemingly analogous concept of respecting fellow men found in virtually all of the great religious and ethical traditions of the world.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ An example of this argument appears throughout Hick’s work as he observes the existence of electromagnetic spectrum. That it is certainly there, despite its invisibility to the human eye, is no question. Therefore, arguments as to the imperceptibility of the Real are ineffective.

an idea of the ultimate incomprehensibility of the Real.⁴⁹ Such inferred understanding is a necessary cognitive idiosyncrasy for the individual:

The subjective correlate of meaning can be called interpretation: to perceive an object or situation as having a particular kind of meaning is to interpret it as having that distinctive character, awareness of which consists in part in an adjustment to our system of practical dispositions.⁵⁰

It is a “dispositional” mystery which confronts the subjective psyche as the individual seeks to inform their unique personal (and temporal) awareness with some definitive conceptual schema— religious or not. However, as one’s individual awareness is tested within the world, however, certain limitations must also be recognized. We are but “parts of the world,” Hick reflects, acknowledging an “inevitably idiosyncratic perspective” through which we filter our experience and existence.⁵¹ This phenomenon is perhaps best described by Thomas Aquinas: “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”⁵² This analysis of inherent subjectivity within Hick’s writing is apparent as he later refers to Wittgenstein’s theory of “experiencing-as,” an idea through which certain predilections of interpretive ability are recognized “by means of concepts and patterns from *memory*.”⁵³ Individuals, responding to such memory, will inevitably *experience* in a manner as sanctioned by their society and internalized cultural norms. Memory, according to Wittgenstein, is fundamentally rooted in a specific situation; thus interpretation is an inherently concept- and value-laden enterprise.

⁴⁹ This idea will be expounded upon further with regard to Hick’s phenomenology of religion, insofar as he provides a highly detailed argument for the subjective, *symbolic* and *metaphoric* interpretation of religious texts and ideas.

⁵⁰ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 138.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologie*, II/II, Q. 1, art. 2. (as quoted in Hick’s *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 153.)

⁵³ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 140. (emphasis added)

This inextricably subjective quality of natural meaning and experiencing-as integrally relates to Hick's definition of religious meaning. Characterizing *religious meaning* as that which is discerned through the application of a specifically religious epistemology, Hick further defines the semantic principle as the result of a "transformation of... 'information' generated at the interface between the Real and the human psyche."⁵⁴ Religious meaning, then (as information obtained through religious experience) "can be individual or communal, can occur on many different levels of intensity and may take endlessly different forms."⁵⁵ God, Brahman, the Tao or the Real, whichever one may choose, is known only through the propositional capacity as established by the individual's personal religious understanding. Religious experience is dependent upon these basic socio-cultural and personal dispositions as established by the individual, and meaning is derived from this subjective arrangement and manipulation of some original influence. The Real as *humanly experienced* is the phenomenon in question; knowledge of the Real is thereby limited to our inherently idiosyncratic perception. In Kantian language, the noumenon remains distinctly separate from and inaccessible to the individual, even as the phenomenon is recognized in various culturally-relativized and intentionally religious forms.⁵⁶

Pluralist Epistemology: Critical Realism and Practical Possibility

⁵⁴ *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 153.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 154.

⁵⁶ Even this relativity does not necessarily confine the Real to be conceptualization within traditionally religious language. Hick notes the popularity of various "secular faiths" such as communism, new-age spirituality and ethical humanism, as it appears individuals are increasingly orienting their lives toward various externally-established schematizations and conceptual structures.

Conceptualizing religious knowledge in such a way, Hick has relied heavily upon the exercise of *critical realism*. A term borrowed from the philosophy of science (particularly those philosophical and scientific endeavors which address human sense perception), critical realism is the idea that individuals “perceive a world that exists independently of our perceiving it... not as it is in itself, unperceived, but always and necessarily only as humanly perceived.”⁵⁷ By this understanding, cognition is limited and undeniably culturally-informed, as the natural meaning of an object or event is unable to be extracted from the specific social context with in it is identified. “Thus,” Hick surmises, “it is true both that we are only directly aware of the appearances made possible by our distinct cognitive equipment and also that mediated through these *we are unaware of the world beyond us*.”⁵⁸ Human knowledge is limited therefore by our unique and culturally-formed awareness and apprehension of the Real.

This conception of the multiform possibility of religious meaning and knowledge has proven problematic for Hick over the years, and critics frequently question the rationale and pragmatic application of pluralism. Gavin D’Costa describes this epistemic position as a form of “simple transcendental agnosticism,” stating that Hick “merely (circumvents) difficulties of conflicting truth claims and... cognitive value”⁵⁹ by

⁵⁷ “A Note on Critical Realism.”

⁵⁸ From Hick’s “A Note on Critical Realism.” (emphasis added) Terry Mathis, attempting to critique Hick’s religious application of awareness towards knowledge, writes

religious awareness is this dissimilar to ordinary experience... Objects and events exert some control over ordinary experience, while God seems to impress people in nearly any way imaginable... (from *Against John Hick*, p. 109.)

This criticism, however, is ill-founded, as Hick repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the variability structure of religious experience with regard to individual interpretation: one representation will not—indeed, cannot—work for all of mankind. For more on this idea (also to be discussed below), see Hick’s “Religion as Skillful Means.”

⁵⁹ D’Costa, *John Hick’s Theology of Religions*, p. 173.

establishing no particular interpretation as possessing sole or primary access to the truth. However, Hick argues throughout his work that purely rational knowledge of the Real is simply *impossible*: the “ultimate reality... is beyond human picturing.”⁶⁰ Allegations of primacy or superiority would be pointless, according to Hick, for humanity cannot breach the epistemological gap which invariably exists between the transcendent object of religious worship and those who engage in religious practice. Therefore, he labors to distance himself from any particularizing context. “The universe,” Hick observes of divergent interpretive qualities, “is religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially both religiously and naturalistically.”⁶¹ It is this intrinsic multiplicity and mystery which creates such contention within contemporary scholarship and practice.⁶²

Hick offers *by definition*— much to the chagrin of his critics— an overtly religious interpretation of religion. In this ‘religious interpretation of religion,’ he states,

I do not claim that the naturalistic, or reductionist, accounts advocated by such thinkers as Feuerbach, Freud, Durkheim... can be shown to be mistaken... The impossibility of refuting such interpretations is an aspect of the pervasive ambiguity of the universe. So also is the equal impossibility of refuting the interpretation of religion as our varied human response to a transcendent reality or realities—the gods, or God, or Brahman, or the Dharmakaya, or the Tao, and so on.⁶³

Returning to the inescapable subjectivity of human cognition, he advises that the individual is completely justified in trusting human experience without naturalistic proof:

⁶⁰ Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 94.

⁶¹ This form of experiential interpretation is part of Hick’s configuration of phenomenology, to be discussed later. (*Interpretation of Religion*, p. 12.)

⁶² Indeed, many scholars have chosen to work outside of the pluralist discourse, electing to subscribe instead to the style of either religious inclusivism (wherein the theologian analyzes a different religion from within the limited context of his own religion, allowing opposing worldviews validity only insofar as they unknowingly, or “anonymously,” subscribed to the tenets of the former’s faith), or religious exclusivism (through which all religions divergent from the one adhered to by the individual are seen as incorrect, fallible and ultimately destructive).

⁶³ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 1.

“the absence of adequate grounds for doubt [makes] it rational to trust our putative experience of an external world that is apparently impinging upon us.”⁶⁴ Observing that there are various “errors and delusions” found in other arenas of human cognition, Hick admits that it is warranted to expect such to be found in the religious sphere as well.⁶⁵ *However*, there is no cause to suppose religiosity any more prone to such aberrations as any other form of human behavior. Conflicting truth claims are at the core of rational debate with regard to religiosity today—a matter of which Hick has thoroughly engaged himself. While it may be beneficial for some to think of and relate to the transcendent in personal, human terminology, others may find any such relational language detrimental to the absolute nature and infinite magnitude of the Real.⁶⁶ Still, others may prefer to conceptualize human existence in terms of biological coincidence and basic evolutionary development, far removed and independent of any external religious ideology.⁶⁷

There can be no significant resolution in this debate, however, and the various hypotheses and conjectures must address themselves to the temporal, transitory and subjective state of humanity. Consequently, Hick has developed a rational source of justification for religious belief: *experience* of the Real is the primary criterion for the rationality of religious knowledge. Hick’s criteriology of pluralism will be discussed below in further detail; however, it is important to note that fulfilling this tenet of conscientious awareness allows the individual to participate in and acquire certain

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 215.

⁶⁵ Abnormal physiological and psychological conditions, such as color-blindness, schizophrenia, autism and deafness, are examples of affective disorders which can impair or impede upon an individual’s conceptualization of the surrounding environment. (*Ibid*, p. 217.)

⁶⁶ A belief in any sort of transcendent Real is not necessarily requisite to the sustenance of Hick’s argument—only that the possibility of the Real is as equally-valid as its impossibility.

⁶⁷ This idea will be expounded upon when addressing the criteriological aspect of pluralism; however, it is necessary to briefly address the topic at the present in order to enable an understanding of Hick’s rational justification of religious belief.

transformative knowledge or religious beliefs— as opposed to those who have no such experience and merely accept a cultural-phenomenon, never possessing a personal experience analogous to that upon which so many realize faith.

Pluralist Phenomenology: Personae and Impersonae

But what of the personal religious experience? Hick believes that due to the finite limitations of human existence, it is necessary to recognize that we live at an “epistemic distance” from God.⁶⁸ Any experience of the Real is limited and therefore partial: consequently, so too is any knowledge pertaining to the religious subject. As human beings, we are incapable of breaching the cognitive gap which would allow the ultimate epistemological and ontological recognition of the transcendent. However, we *are* able to experience various *personae* of the Real, thus deriving a compensatory form of procedural knowledge and subsequent associated practice.⁶⁹ Human subjectivity mediates this experience though, and the Real is accordingly manifested through the expressive and pragmatic dialectic of a particular culture. As many researchers have noted, there are certain repeated patterns of integral phenomena and phenomenal-relation functioning within many world religions.⁷⁰ The comparative study of this intricate

⁶⁸ Badham, “The Philosophical Theology of John Hick,” p. 3.

⁶⁹ D’Costa presents a helpful diagram of this differentiation between the Real and its various personae in *John Hick’s Theology of Religions: a Critical Evaluation*, a full list and explanation of which can be found in his text (p. 156-170). However, in the interest of clarity, I suggest a few for consideration: Eckhart’s *Dietas* (Godhead) vs. *Deus* (God); Sankara’s Nirguna Brahman vs. Saguna Brahman; Jewish Kabbal’s *Ein Soph* vs. the Old Testament God; and Mahayana Buddhism’s *Dharmakaya/Sunyata* vs. the *nirmanakaya* are to name but a few.

⁷⁰ For example, the similarities found among various American Indian tribal religions can be explained as the result different of communal responses to an identical – indeed, the *same* — phenomenon.

network of exhibited affinity is known as *phenomenology* (from the Greek *phenomenon*, “an appearance”), a practice which encourages the examination— in experiential context—of “things in the form, or appearance, they present to us.”⁷¹ Thus phenomenology is an essential element of Hick’s pluralism as he seeks to examine the object, content and purpose of individual personal religious experience.

Attention to the overwhelming diversity of religious experience is central to Hick’s pluralist thesis. Because variously important elements of human religion are dependent upon the initial, subjective experience, there are extraordinary deviations upon the same noumenon with literally thousands of recorded names for these specific phenomenal manifestations.⁷² With regard to the lack of conformity in religious nomenclature, Hick observes

Shiva and Krishna and Yahweh and Allah and the Heavenly Father... name different concrete images of the Real operating in the religious consciousness and life of different human communities. Each is thought of, experienced, and responded to as the Lord, the object of our devotion, the determiner of our destiny, the Ultimate in relation to us. And... we must say that each is indeed an authentic, life-giving manifestation of the Real within a different strand of human life.⁷³

Each of these is a form characterized distinctly by human cultural consciousnesses: “they are personae and impersonae... of the Ultimate as it impinges upon our different religious mentalities... [conceived and responded to] from within the different cultural ways of

⁷¹ Humanistic theologians such as Mircea Eliade ardently advocate the “understanding of religion on its own terms,” as opposed to any reductionist conceptualization. Accordingly, the symbolic correlation between various religions receives considerable attention as scholars attempt to reconcile cross-cultural similarities that seem to imply some sort of “other-worldly” derivation. (Pals, Daniel L. *Seven Theories of Religion*, p. 162.)

⁷² Islam alone has 99 names for God, each according to the specific relational context of the religious encounter.

⁷³ Hick, “The Real and Its Personae and Impersonae.”

being human.”⁷⁴ Indeed, within the major world-traditions there is a profound social, historical and psychological distinction which appears between the Real in itself and the “Real” as manifest within the intellectual and experiential capacity of that tradition.⁷⁵

Aware of these distinctions among divergent cultural perceptions of the transcendent, Hick attempts to exonerate himself from the trappings of loaded and religiously-particular vocabulary as he refers to “the Real” or “the Ultimate.” As noted previously, this broader terminological framework is unlike those which function within particular communities and religious discourses, differing significantly

from those that operate within a particular living religious tradition, [and consequently] enter into its distinctive mode of religious experience, [thereby] shaping its liturgical language or meditative practice, and being reflectively described in its philosophy or theology.

Avoiding the complex associative problem of linguistics, Hick has instead selected the non-aligned term of “the Real” in an attempt to effectively

understand the relationship between those primary concepts (of experience, liturgy, practice and philosophy). (The Real)... has a global scope. For it is the concept of the ground of this plurality of forms of religious experience and thought—the ultimate reality which is variously conceived, experienced and responded to within the different traditions of the world.⁷⁶

An abstracted and un-qualifiable “ground” of religiosity, the formulation of “the Real” is Hick’s attempt to make possible discussion of that which exists beyond human language and thought—a ground yet which remains essential to human existential awareness.

⁷⁴ Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, p. 10. As Badham notes in “Profile: John Hick,” Hick believes that “Religious experience makes it rational for the believer to trust in the reality of that which they have encountered, but it does not determine the detail of doctrinal beliefs” (p. 25)—hence, the diversity of religious understandings within single traditions.

⁷⁵ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 90. With regard to this title, Hick soon changed his position after meeting with the advaitic Hindu tradition in India and Buddhism in Sri Lanka: he determined that “God” was too closely identified with Christianity, developing ‘the Real’ instead.

⁷⁶ from “The Real and its Personae and Impersonae.”

Relying again upon the Kantian distinction between the Real and the Real *an sich*, Hick uses this principle to differentiate between the various phenomenal manifestations of a noumenal ultimate Reality, distinguishing between the two as uniquely conceived by and operating within specific human communities.

Pluralist Phenomenology: Mystical Modes and Atheistic Understandings

But what of these vastly different representations of the ultimate noumenon, the ambiguous and variously associated religious phenomena? These differences, Hick argues, occur solely within the realm of substantial attributes (of human religious understanding), and are primarily focused upon debate as to the manifest personality or impersonality of the Real.⁷⁷ Assorted configurations have come into being, so to speak, as a result of human creative and cultural impulses. Therefore, diverse linguistic conceptions of the experience of the essential infinite are the cross-cultural genii of historical religious traditions. Pluralism, according to Hick, assumes that each of traditions exists as a result of a single instantiation of the same entity, representing different socio-cultural configurations of an identical: the Real, then, is Allah is Brahman is the Tao is God is Zen is the Ultimate.

It is important to note that, contrary to claims by some of his critics, Hick does *not* advocate a universalist theory of religiosity, nor is he caught in the restrictive conceptions

⁷⁷ "(The) descriptions of ultimate reality treasured by the different religions do not apply literally to the Ultimate in itself," he writes in *The Fifth Dimension*. These various formal representations within religions are instead "forms which human awareness of the Real has been given by human consciousness. They are personae and impersonae of the Ultimate as it impinges upon our different [cultural and] religious mentalities..." (p. 10.)

of religious particularism.⁷⁸ The various “particularities” are fundamental reason for religion. “The hypothesis I want to consider,” Hick writes, “is that what [each name] describes is not the Ultimate as it is in itself but as it is conceived in the variety of ways made possible by our varied human mentalities and cultures—our different modes of religious experience being in turn made possible by those concepts.”

Though the *substantial attributes* of the Real are represented through sometimes contrary cultural configurations—of singularity or multiplicity, of form or lack thereof—the specific *evocation* of religious sentiment is often harmonized cross-culturally: knowledge truly takes place according to Aquinas’ “mode of the knower.” This justification is apparent within all of the major traditions, he argues. No single religion “has universal validity,” Hick notes, “...rather, each is part of the history of a particular religio-cultural form of human life.”⁷⁹ This emphasis upon cohesion in spite of cultural difference allows various metaphorical representations images of the Real to operate cooperatively within the basic interpretive matrix of pluralism.

Evidence of this Kantian differentiation can be found in a multiplicity of traditions, Hick points out, both theistic and non-theistic (or atheistic) understandings, each conceptualized and understood according to variously-appropriated language and diverse practice. Mysticism is frequently thought to be the center of religious experience and for many individuals comprises the core definition of religion. In his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience* William James defines religion as “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to*

⁷⁸ Hick, “The Real and Its Personae and Impersonae.” Stetson characterizes Hick as a proponent of “transcendental agnosticism,” alleging that the pluralist theory (per Hick) is intelligible and an utter failure with regard to its epistemological construct, its “alleged neutrality” and complete arbitrariness. (For more on this tautological criticism, see Stetson’s *Pluralism and Particularity*.)

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

stand in relation to whatever the may consider the divine," noting further that such "immediate personal experiences" are to be held paramount with regard to the personal idea of religion, in whatever form it may take.⁸⁰ The object of this experience, the very transcategorical Other—the "ineffable Real" as it is sometimes characterized—constitutes the foundation of mysticism. Yet, as James notes, the truly mystical experience cannot be put into words, cannot be forced into inadequate human conceptual categories: the mystical encounter is, he writes, by definition "ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive."⁸¹ Therefore religion in and of itself is founded upon an initial unmediated, untranslatable experience of the Divine, as all knowledge is tentative at best. Writing more than fifty years before Hick, James was well-aware of the pluralistic nature of the universe and the recognitional importance (and problem) of individual subjectivity in relation to any religious concept. Contrary to James, however, Hick refrains from the dialectic of restricting religious experience to an entirely mystical framework. Instead Hick subscribes to a *rational* phenomenology of experience, one which recognizes logically the great multiplicity and diversity of forms in which religious awareness may participate.⁸²

⁸⁰ p. 31.

⁸¹ On James, Hick writes, "To affirm the goodness of the universe—which William James, in my view, rightly identified as the essential message of religion—is to affirm an ultimate reality transcending the flux of change and chance, a reality which is in its relation to us to be rejoiced in" (from "Religion and Its Personae and Impersonae").

⁸² Critics such as Mathis doubt the possibility of a rational experience of the Real. In *Against John Hick*, he writes "Religious experience is thus dissimilar to ordinary experience because it does not seem to have the same empirical basis... Such experience may be purely subjective, in which case talk about a divine noumenal reality would by Hick's own reckoning be non-cognitive and oftentimes meaningless..." (Mathis, 109-110.) This is, however, a misunderstanding of Hick's philosophy. There is, according to Hick, a subjective element of interpretation with regard to the objective Real: we postulate the existence of the Real, the validity of the religious experience, as a result of the empirical evidence which we have access to. Therefore, because we are denied access to the Real *an sich*, the experience acquires boundless meaning.

Hick's point of experiential yet rational genius is illustrated through a careful phenomenological analysis of Hinduism and Buddhism, among other religions, attending to similarities and differences found within the faiths. Advaitic Hindu thought, as it is known, separates *nirguna* Brahman (absent of attributes and incapable of linguistic translation) from *saguna* Brahman (an attributive form known primarily to human cognition as Ishvara, "the personal creator of the universe"⁸³). *Saguna* Brahman is merely a humanly accessible version of the ultimate *nirguna* Brahman—a symbol of the Ultimate, if you will. Kabir, a mystical fifteenth-century Sikh-Sufi poet and early proponent of interreligious discussion, is attributed the following in the *Adi Granth*:

Some call on the Lord, 'Ram, Ram!' Some cry, 'Khuda!'
Some bow to Him as Gosain, some as Allah:
He is called the Ground of Grounds and also the Bountiful,
The Mountain of Mercies, the Merciful...⁸⁴

This reverential spiritual encounter with the divine is prevalent throughout the history of world religions, frequently transcending tradition and ignoring boundaries of time and space. Mahayana Buddhism similarly recognizes a distinction between the ultimate Dharmakaya and its division into the heavenly Buddhas of the Sambhogakaya, and their subsequent incarnation in the Nirmanakaya. Hick notes a further correspondence of Buddhist thought which occurs in the Pure Land tradition first propagated by Shinran in the thirteenth century. Pure Land Buddhism recognizes a distinction between the *dharmata dharmakaya*, or the Dharmakaya *an sich*, and the *upaya dhamakaya*, or the Dharma as socio-culturally conceptualized in the form of the personal and compassionate "Amida."

⁸³ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 236.

⁸⁴ <http://www.sikhs.org/granth.htm>

Among Buddhas and bodhisattvas there are two aspects of dharmakaya: dharmakaya-as-suchness and dharmakaya-as-compassion. Dharmakaya-as-compassion arises out of dharmakaya-as-suchness, and dharmakaya-as-suchness emerges into [human consciousness through] dharmakaya-as-compassion. These two aspects of dharmakaya differ, but are not separate; they are one but not identical.⁸⁵

However, as Hick and others caution, neither Hinduism nor Buddhism (nor Christianity nor Islam...) provides adequate religious resolution for all people.

Hick observes that mystical experiences similar to those mentioned above are found in western traditions as well, though in relatively different cultural-fashion. Christian visionaries such as the medieval Julian of Norwich claim to have undergone profound mystical experiences relating to the Christian God, often reporting participation in the Crucifixion or premature ascension to Heaven. Evidence of these numinous experiences is found throughout the Christian mystical poetry of individuals such as Bernard of Clairveaux and Meister Eckhart. With regard to the Jewish form of mysticism known as Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem comments that "it is only in ... [the] ecstasy [of] actual union with God in which the human individuality abandons itself to the rapture of complete submersion in the divine stream..."⁸⁶ As these examples illustrate the infinite divine reality—the Real, the noumenon absent of any human discourse— eludes all characterizations even from within a specific tradition, thus remaining in a limitless transcendent and trans-categorical state.

According to Hick, the content of each of the aforementioned mystical experiences is comprised of the *same irreducible encounter* with the Real, translated differently according to various cultural contexts and subjectivity: "to say that God is

⁸⁵ As quoted from Shinran's *Yuishinsho-mon'i* (1250), appearing in Hick's *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 236.

⁸⁶ As quoted in Hick's *The Fifth Dimension*, p. 151.

Infinite is to say that He may be apprehended and described in an infinity of ways.”⁸⁷

This infinity of phenomena cannot be simply the result of some Feuerbachian projection. It is—and must be—the product of rational human cognition. It is important to note, Hick writes, “an interpretive element is always and unavoidably present... [Even] the mystic is still an embodied human mind; and thus always functions in accordance with its own inherent structure, its cultural formation and its individual experience.”⁸⁸ Culturally-formed lenses of consciousness are ever-present and perpetually active. There remains though a strong correlate between the varied mystical experiences of the Real across traditions, a correspondence which only *appears* divergent due to the cognitive limits and linguistic bounds of the finite individual encountering the infinite Transcendent.

Forming the basis of Hick’s philosophical claims as to the importance of religious phenomenology, experiential ontology permeates the majority of his philosophical texts. Phenomenology is, by definition, the study of religious *experience*, whether overtly mystical or mediated through a particularizing orthodoxy. However impossible *knowledge* of the Real may be, *experience* is not: the personal religious experience is one of the most powerful impetuses towards self-transformation and change recognized in human sociology and psychology.⁸⁹ Noting this operative phenomenological understanding of pluralism, it is important to keep in mind—as Hick continually illustrates—that, these varying religious configurations, personal or no, frequently serve to achieve strikingly similar goals. Indeed, a transformative human experience in which the individual surmounts the ego in an effort to achieve unity with

⁸⁷ As quoted from Evelyn Underhill in Hick’s *The Fifth Dimension*, p. 238.

⁸⁸ “The Real and its Personae and Impersonae.”

⁸⁹ Reminiscent of James, Hick notes that the Real “is not a phenomenon available for scientific study, but Religion *is*.” (From *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 90.)

the Real often constitutes the requisite achievement of "salvation." This behavioral shift is frequently recognized within religion as a result of potent encounter with the Real and is characterized in a variety of ways. Indeed, Hick has characterized this feature as inherent to the *soteriological* nature of religion, insofar as religion serves to transform the individual's current existential state, making possible a new and infinitely more satisfactory awareness.⁹⁰

Discerning a clear pattern of "soteriology" (as defined in terms of transformation above) in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam—even Marxism—Hick further delineates those analogous principles within these traditions. For example, the aforementioned religions all perceive present human life as "defective, unsatisfactory [and] lacking."⁹¹ Whether this substandard state is understood as the result of Christian Original Sin,⁹² Islamic *ghafala*,⁹³ Marxist alienation,⁹⁴ Jewish *yetzer ha-ra*,⁹⁵ Hindu *avidya*⁹⁶ or Buddhist *dukkha*,⁹⁷ it is the reality of which humanity is currently a part and that from which it must "seek" religious transformation.

⁹⁰ It is important to note that Hick recognizes the non-soteriological aims of various world religions as well. Indeed, there are many religions in which the notion of salvation—or even its preceding state of dissatisfaction or sin—is completely alien. With regards to these non-soteriological traditions (such as are found in American Indian religions), Hick responds with an emphasis upon the unitive goal of any "salvation." The notion of soteriology then, is devoid of any explicit content, referring only to the shift of the individual consciousness self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. (For more on this idea, see Hick's *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 29-66.)

⁹¹ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 33.

⁹² The Christian doctrine of Original Sin is understood as the retributive result of the first sin of Adam and Eve, the means by which all of humanity is rendered corrupt and faulty, ultimately alienated from God.

⁹³ *Ghafala* is the Islamic understanding by which human beings are recognized as being weak and utterly fallible and are, henceforth, living in forgetfulness of God.

⁹⁴ Marxist ideology defines alienation as the detrimental result of individual capitalist adventures that serve divide society into disparate classes, thereby creating and encouraging ruthless competition between the groups.

⁹⁵ Judaism believes that humans suffer from an innate proclivity towards evil, or *yetzer ha-ra*. Life for God's chosen people, then, is extremely dangerous and survival is often difficult in the face of this harassment by evil forces.

⁹⁶ *Avidya* is the Hindu conception of basic human ignorance, which leads to dis-satisfaction and general suffering in the present life.

In all these forms the ultimate, the divine, the Real, is that which makes possible a transformation of our present existence, whether by being drawn into fellowship with the transcendent Thou, or by realising our deeper self as one with the Real, or by unlearning our habitual ego-centeredness and becoming a conscious and accepting part of the endlessly interacting flow of life which is both samsara and nirvana...⁹⁸

Thus the soteriological aspect which appears in all of the major traditions hinges upon the ultimate and complete "transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness."⁹⁹ This "Reality-centeredness," for Hick, is the ultimate goal of many traditions encouraging the subversion of human solipsism, apparent in Buddhism, Hinduism and the Semitic traditions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.¹⁰⁰

The precise locus of this new altruistic center, however, is a point of contingency among traditions: some locate this state of refinement and perfection in the imminent teleological future, whereas other traditions hold transformation possible in the present moment, placing the sole responsibility for change within the "unrealized depths"¹⁰¹ of the individual. Naturalist critics such as Paul Griffiths see religion as absolutely superfluous with regard to "salvation." "The (mystical) attainment of salvation has nothing whatever to do with belonging to any religion," Griffiths argues, thus problematically granting the possibility of a soteriological realization completely devoid of any religious context.¹⁰²

What purpose would any sense of "salvation," to which Griffiths refers in *Problems of Religious Diversity*, serve the individual if devoid of any religious context,

⁹⁷ *Dukkha* is the first doctrine of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism which decries that all of life consists of a fundamental "unsatisfactoriness," including but not limited to pain, sorrow, anxiety and death.

⁹⁸ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ *God Had Many Names*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this correlation of transformative human experience, see Hick's *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 32-55. For more on the definition of religion in this context of "transformative operation," see Paul Griffiths' narrow critique of Hick's "pluralist soteriology" in *Problems of Religious Diversity*, p. 138-150.

¹⁰¹ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 35.

¹⁰² Griffiths, p. 149.

and with no awareness of an existence in which salvation would be of liberating import? Hick addresses such claims optimistically: "it is within the experiential spectrum *as a whole*, both mystical and mediated, that the transforming power of religion is felt."¹⁰³ In whatever form the phenomenon is recognized, it is important only in that it evoke the appropriate emotion and sentiment, and that it function as a viable metaphor and symbol for the individual.

Pluralist Criteriology: Religious Understanding and Application

This raises a problematic *criteriological* issue for Hick within pluralism: if the universe is religiously ambiguous (as noted previously), by what criteria can any religion be assessed? And by what means are such criteria established?¹⁰⁴ This point becomes increasingly complicated for Hick as he struggles to maintain the pluralist discussion within a religiously-neutral paradigm. Proposing a set of criteria by which religions may be examined, he focuses upon the specific tradition's intrinsic ethical principle, the questions which are left "unanswered," and the manifold difficulties associated with conflicting truth claims.

Hick does not deny that there are monumental differences among the world's religious traditions, many of which are quite antithetical to one another. Commenting on this radical disparity he notes that "different forms of religious experience justify

¹⁰³ *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 88. (emphasis added)

¹⁰⁴ *God Has Many Names*, p. 115.

different and often incompatible sets of beliefs” based on formal divergences.¹⁰⁵ These opposing belief-systems are increasingly at odds with one another in the international socio-political spectrum and frequently in conflict. Yet this dominant tension is at variance with the central tenets of most of these conflicting traditions, those common tenets being “love, compassion, generous concern for and commitment to the welfare of others.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, Hick notes a prevailing tendency within the great traditions to epitomize these values as emphasized in a sort of universal “Golden Rule,” though always stated within a particular and unique linguistic and cultural paradigm. This principle of ethical determination becomes his first and principle criterion for the assessment of religion.

An example of the criteriological principle of a “Golden Rule” can be found in the Buddhist prescription to “live rightly.” This prescription is expounded in the *Dhammapada*: “All we are is the result of what we have thought... if a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.”¹⁰⁷ An additional Buddhist formulation of ethical behavior is found in the Noble Eightfold Path, which advocates right speech (*vaca*) and action (*kammanta*); mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samadhi*); morality (*sankappa*) and diligence (*vayama*); right living (*ajiva*) and perspective (*ditthi*).¹⁰⁸ Various Pali scriptures likewise mandate friendliness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and serenity (*samatha*).

Buddhist precepts of ethical behavior can be effectively juxtaposed with those of Christianity and its associated moral principles. Indeed, Christianity similarly upholds the

¹⁰⁵ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 316.

¹⁰⁷ *Dhammapada*, Book 1.

¹⁰⁸ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 319.

ideal of universal love and compassion (*agape*). Perhaps the most compelling example of this is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a series of beatitudes delivered before to an audience of followers:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see (God).
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.¹⁰⁹

Such commandments of love and charity are echoed throughout the New Testament, found alternatively in the letters of Paul and John, and reinforce those moral tenets of compassion and forgiveness within the religion.

Modern ethical precepts such as these can be found to operate within multiple distinctive traditions. With regard to this ethical criterion there is, however, a significant difference between the *ideal* and its *application* within the society. Often these moral and ethical precepts are translated into specific social regulations and political policy, though with varying effect.¹¹⁰ Prior to any contemporary literal application of these teachings, however, one must first give priority to the social context in which it was originally delivered. As Hick observes, in many cases the particular religious ethos was generated in direct response to a specific instance or situation and is thus affected by the speaker's unique position in relation to the broader social realm. Generally speaking,

the more immediate and pressing this [social] responsibility the more practical and socially-oriented the teaching; whilst the more remote (the individual was) from political responsibility the more ideal and... individualistic the teaching.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 5:5-9.

¹¹⁰ This idea will also be discussed later with regard to Hick's assessment of "liberal morality" and its place within modern western societies; its application with regard to capitalism and nuclear advancement; and international conflict.

¹¹¹ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 332.

Such is evident with regard to the socially-legislative teachings of ancient Jewish prophets and Mohammad; the idealistic traditions of Gautama Buddha and Jesus. This is not to say though that figures such as Jesus were *not* concerned with their contemporary social organization: Hick notes Jesus' incredible social impact and implications during his life, though surmises an ultimate dissociation from the political sphere on the part of the Christian leader. Clarifying this point, he contrasts Mohammad's direct involvement in the political-commercial realm of tribal Mecca with the pastoral didacticism of Jesus.¹¹² Therefore, though the ethical and moral precepts of many religious traditions exemplify these same essential ideals of kindness, compassion and mercy, their ultimate application with regard to the "concrete circumstances of life in *different times and places* has varied greatly."¹¹³

And yet they all serve as culturally-specific configurations of the basic intimations of the Real, and can be thus understood according to Hick's criteriological definition. An ethical ideal cannot be applied directly to the Real *an sich*, for as such it lies beyond human attributive categories. However, from the perspective of human cognition, the Real does express itself through the sense of community and universal compassion found among diverse religions. "In its personae," Hick writes,

the Real does have ethical qualities. Adonai, Vishnu, Shiva, the heavenly Father and Allah each... come within the scope of the ethical criterion of love, compassion, [and] generous forgiveness.

The Real thereby participates in a moral relationship with the individual worshipper through its perceived existence and activity within the phenomenal world.¹¹⁴

¹¹²For more on this distinction, see *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 333-334.

¹¹³*Ibid*, p. 336. (emphasis added)

¹¹⁴*Ibid*, p. 340.

Nevertheless, no matter how real this relationship may seem with the religious phenomenon, it does not provide a comprehensive set of criteria toward which the individual life may be oriented. As a result, many traditions have accepted a "doctrine of religious ignorance," appropriating the absence of knowledge as necessary in order to discern true religious knowledge.¹¹⁵ One of the most explicit characterizations of this "accepted" ignorance or "attained" agnosticism is found within the Buddhist doctrine of *avyakatyā*, the "unanswered questions." A primary tenet of Buddhist thought, *avyakatyā* is a list of propositions prepared by Tathagata for which there is no resolution. Within religious text, the statement that "the world is eternal" is immediately followed by "the world is not eternal"; the Buddha is said to "both exist and not exist after death" and that he "neither exists nor does not exist after death."

Such a list of apparently irresolvable contradictions serves to illustrate an essential point with regard to the capacity of human knowledge and being: "to know the answers to these questions is not necessary for liberation and that to treat them as though they were soteriologically important will only hinder our advance toward liberation."¹¹⁶ For Buddhism achieving such knowledge is unrelated to the ultimate goal of *nirvana*; therefore, there is no need to be distracted by the pursuit of it. To be sure, Hick notes, while there must indeed be "answers" to the propositions of the *avyakatyā*, these answers exist outside the realm of human consciousness and transcend the systems of thought and types of language available to the individual. To quote Christian philosopher Thomas á

¹¹⁵ *Disputed Questions*, p. 106-108.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 106.

Kempis, "What availeth it to cavail and dispute much about the dark and hidden things, for ignorance of which we shall not be reprov'd at the day of judgment?"¹¹⁷

Pluralist Criteriology: Religious Metaphor or Truth?

Humans, though, forever *strive* for knowledge of the Real, grasping at of any method through which understanding seems possible. One of the most often-adapted categories of religious understanding is that which occurs through the metaphorical imagery. As Hick illustrates, throughout history in the attempt to realize the expression of a situational reality beyond traditional human comprehension, humans have repeatedly turned to metaphor. Undeniably one of the most vigorous aspects of this contemporary tradition, "expository myths" serve to "evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude" within an individual toward an object or situation. For these myths it is not the "literal conformity" to the truth of a fact that is important, but rather the myth's *efficacy* in evoking a certain cultural attitudes or religious sentiments.¹¹⁸ Terminological constructs such as these are necessary in the pursuit of religious knowledge, though grossly inadequate as literal linguistic configurations.

This metaphorical understanding of religion is completely in line with the other criteriological aspects of Hick's pluralist philosophy. Knowledge of the Real is impossible in human terms; therefore, humanity has developed an analogical system of interpretation and the subsequent institutionalization of phenomena, Hick argues.

¹¹⁷ As quoted within Hick's *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 347.

¹¹⁸ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 348.

Descriptive terms and ideas which relate to the experience of the various phenomenon of the Real are extraneous to the Real *an sich*. Because of this inadequacy of terminology (seen elsewhere also), none of the language that applies “within the realm of human experience can [thus] apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies (it)... [Therefore] we postulate the Real *an sich* as the ultimate ground of the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience.”¹¹⁹ Metaphorical and analogical language pertaining to the various subjects and/or objects of religious worship, then, is related directly to the Real *an sich*. Human response to the infinite provides the discourse in which a discussion of phenomenal religion must take place. Hick continues:

For insofar as these gods and absolutes are indeed manifestations of the ultimately Real, an appropriate human response to any one of them will also be an appropriate response to the Real.¹²⁰

Thus the Real in itself is the ultimate “unanswerable question.” Hick recognizes the importance of individually appropriated *upaya*, or “skillful means,” with regard to personal religiosity. While *upaya* is traditionally associated with the Buddhist notion of salvation and the attainment of nirvana, Hick has appropriated and adapted this term as a fundamental category within the pluralist program of dialogue and activity.¹²¹ This simultaneous recognition and validation of diverse human experience is an important element of Hick’s religious philosophy. Referring to the inherently “skillful means” employed by any such pedagogue, he observes that one

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 350.

¹²⁰ *Disputed Questions*, p. 107.

¹²¹ This is another example of the problem of language which plagues the pluralist enterprise. The efficacy of translation is heavily disputed and individuals must be ever-cognizant so as not to pervert the term from its original intent: *translation*, not *transformation* should be the intent. Hick offers such an example in his adaptation of *upaya*, as he recognizes its contextual efficiency and neither demeans the religion, nor degrades the term.

is not usually declaring general truths, valid for all time and circumstances, but [rather] is speaking to a particular individual or group and is taking account of his [audience's]... state and adapting his words to the stage of understanding at which he perceives them to be.

One is encouraged to reach an awareness of the transcendent by any means possible, necessarily teaching in a like manner. One must remain, however, mindful of the ultimate reality which lies beneath any provisional understanding: there is no single true religion, none which can assert supremacy above another in response to the mystery of the transcendent. Indeed, all operate as evocative metaphor and as reflexive communal representations of the inexpressible thus configured within human imagination. Recalling Hick's discussion of the soteriological nature inherent to all religions, he continues: the ultimate pluralist function of religion, in all of its variant forms, is "to be an enabling context of transformation... thus freeing what they variously call the true or selfless self, the *atman*, the universal Buddha nature, the image of God within us."¹²² In relation to the Real then, nothing can be understood as literal or concrete; everything is *striving*, nothing is *immutable*, and personal religious orientation must be the result of an individualized understanding and realization.

We have seen that there is no point of direct access through which humanity can acquire knowledge of the Real. However, virtually every soteriological religion claims to possess some sort of spiritual monopoly upon the means of salvation. Accepting Hick's definition as such of equally-verifiable and contingent phenomenal manifestations of the Real throughout human consciousness, the problem of conflicting truth-claims is thus unavoidable. Conflict surrounding innumerable doctrinal disagreements among religious groups is rampant: disagreement as to the possibility (or probability) of reincarnation, the

¹²² *The Fifth Dimension*, p. 8.

problem of evil or the existence of the soul are but a few of these. In an effort to denote the practical and philosophical oppositions which invariably occur during this debate, Hick differentiates between historical and trans-historical truth-claims in his writing.

Hick notes that, throughout the heterogeneous manifestation of world-religions, there are numerous recorded instances reported to have taken place within the actual human-historical timeline: individuals *were* born; groups *did* migrate; battles *were* fought. Such events are said to belong to “the series of visible, audible and tangible constituents of... history.”¹²³ Actual as such, they are exclusive to the individual belief-system of a particular tradition, thereby comprising a significant element of the faith. Historical disputes, then, can only be settled by some sort of unbiased presentation and examination of historical evidence: though resolution *is possible*, lack of a preponderance of evidence forces many historical debates to remain unsettled. To be sure, as Hick notes, “rational resolutions [such as these] have generally proved elusive,” as ground for complete objectivity is difficult to obtain.¹²⁴ For many individuals, these historical matters form the core content of their faith: ideas such as the Transfiguration of Christ and midnight flight of Mohammad from Mecca to Jerusalem are examples of such issues which are often difficult to separate from a specific religious context. Indeed, the metaphorical nature of these examples is frequently ignored—even denied—by members of a particular religion: for them, the phenomenon *is* the reality and any revision of this “established truth” is impossibly heretical.

¹²³ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 363.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 365. This problem associated with objectivity has been recognized by many scholars, including critics of Hick and religious pluralism. For more on these issues critiquing the challenges to any achievement of religious objectivity, see D’Costa’s 1993 essay “Whose objectivity? Which neutrality? The doomed quest for a neutral vantage point from which to judge religions.”

The second type of conflicting truth-claim which Hick identifies concerns the religious understanding of “trans-historical” issues. Matters of trans-historical import are frequently associated with the Buddhist doctrine of *avyakatyā*, the unanswered questions, which we have seen earlier. Problems of trans-historical debate “have to do with questions to which there is in principle a true answer, but one which cannot be established by historical or other empirical evidence.”¹²⁵ Hick notes that these questions tend to be at variance among religious traditions according to their locus of origin — particularly, Indian and Semitic. Investigations of religious cosmology are examples of these differences: Is the universe eternal? Or did it have a beginning? Answers to these questions, however, would ultimately fail to bring harmony to disparate religious groups: for what can it matter, “even from a theistic point of view,” Hick asks, “to know whether the universe is eternal?” Ignorance of this fact—simply regarding it as *avyakatyā*—does not limit the realization of the individual’s soteriological objective, Hick argues. The ultimate resolution of such a question has no significant bearing upon the individual’s present and all-important “transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.”¹²⁶

Therefore, with regard to the pluralistic hypothesis, Hick contends “a number of trans-historical beliefs, which are at present unverifiable and unfalsifiable, may well be true or false myths (configured for the purpose of human understanding) rather than true or false assertions.”¹²⁷ He continues:

our pluralistic hypothesis holds that whilst such beliefs may in a particular phase of history be mythologically true for the particular group whose

¹²⁵ *God Has Many Names*, p. 80.

¹²⁶ *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 367.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 371.

religious life they support, they do not have the literal truth that would constitute them true for *everyone*.¹²⁸

Truth, then, is a matter of individual determination,¹²⁹ though with incredibly contentious application. The authenticity of a particular religion, the measure of its truth and validity, lies in its ultimate soteriological effectiveness—its functional capacity to promote and facilitate recognition of the Real, and the personal transcendence of the egotistical self. The realization of this religious potential within our contemporary pluralist context is Hick's ultimate concern.

Contemporary Pluralist Response and Dialogue

This ideal, however, remains exceedingly difficult to achieve within modern society. There is a degree of pragmatism to the pluralist hypothesis which, unfortunately, has yet to materialize within the international religious community. Simply put, how can effective pluralist dialogue emerge into the present realm of religion and politics? In what form would it take, and to what degree could it be integrated within present international socio-political and economic conditions? The extreme diversity (cultural, political, religious and otherwise) of our present world is, as some critics have suggested, almost at odds with the unitive directives of pluralism. *Religious* diversity, then, poses a moral

¹²⁸ *The Fifth Dimension*, p. 77. (emphasis added) For more on this topic, see Hick's *Autobiography or Interpretation of Religion* (p. 371-372) in both of which he discusses his personal experience of difficulty with regard to trans-historical truth and his own Christian faith: an experience which led to his expulsion from the Presbyterian Church.

¹²⁹ Griffiths alleges a further differentiation between the "assent" and "acceptance" of truth by the individual, defining the former as an *involuntary* recognition of belief, whereas the latter is a *voluntary* decision made by the individual upon the realization of responsibility and knowledge. For more on this idea, see *Problems of Religious Diversity*, p. 26-37.

problem because it disrupts any possibility of a sense of global community, often promoting conflict instead of cooperation.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, while ultimate reconciliation among divergent groups may be virtually impossible, the increasing multiculturalism and religious plurality of our world must be accepted, appreciated and appropriated in a fruitful way. Though Hick and other pluralists have yet to develop an explicit, step-by-step plan for the successful initiation of pluralism into the global sphere, they do provide intriguing clues for the application of an internationally-collaborative pluralist philosophy. As illustrated in the revolutionary teachings of Gandhi in the early-twentieth century, pluralism has increasingly provided the framework upon which social change is initiated. Indeed, the contemporary application of pluralism, as Hick and others have shown, has great potential within the tempestuous international socio-political climate.

Pluralism is not, however, the sole option for those wishing to engage in a responsive cross-cultural or interreligious dialogue. Another option is religious *exclusivism*. Exclusivism holds that there can be no salvation, no *moksha*, no *nirvana*, no liberation outside of the particular religious body of which one is a member: as Hick states, “the rest of mankind... [is] either left out of account or explicitly excluded from the sphere of salvation.”¹³¹ Perhaps the most “emphatic and influential expression” of such a belief is to be seen in the Catholic dogma *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church, no salvation).¹³² Exclusivism limits the possibility for attainment exclusively to a particular tradition, rejecting the majority of humankind. Such a perspective on humanity

¹³⁰ An idea proposed by many conservative critics of pluralism. For more on this, see Griffiths' *Problems of Religious Diversity*.

¹³¹ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 31.

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 31.

(characteristic to fundamentalism) has recently come under increasing attack, deemed as unacceptable in the midst of growing cultural dynamism and a burgeoning ecumenical dialogue.¹³³

Another possibility offered to the religious individual can be found in religious *inclusivism*, an hypothesis to which the majority of modern theologians cling. Known analogically through Karl Rahner's notion of the "anonymous Christian," inclusivism still locates "salvation" within a single religious framework, though it allows for the *possibility* of salvation for those outside of the tradition through the intrinsic benevolence of the former's faith: all of humanity is gathered in "one church," even if unawares. Explained thus in Christian terminology, inclusivism promotes the belief that when there is good, "wherever it happens, [it is] the [unanimous] work of Christ."¹³⁴ This idea is exceedingly problematic as well, for inclusivism refuses to acknowledge the authenticity or efficacy of other traditions.

Writing on the necessity of recognizing the increasing diversity of the international religious spectrum and the elimination of isolationist ideology, Hicks' friend and mentor Wilfred Cantwell Smith observes, "Humanity has yet to learn our new task of living together as partners in a world of religious and cultural plurality." He continues,

The task of constructing even the minimum degree of world fellowship that will be necessary for humanity to survive at all is far too great to be accomplished on any other than a religious basis. From no other source than faith, I believe, can human beings muster the energy, devotion, vision, resolve, the capacity to survive disappointment, that will be necessary—that *are* necessary—for this challenge.¹³⁵

¹³³ *Disputed Questions*, p. 142.

¹³⁴ *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 33.

¹³⁵ Smith, "The Church in a Religiously Plural World," *Christianity and Plurality*, p. 315.

For Smith such tolerance and understanding are absolutely necessary in any lasting and peaceful society.

After careful examination of these alternative suggestions for dialogue, Hick suggests the pluralist model for consideration founding his ideas in the work of Kant, James and Smith, among others. Recognizing the necessity of a dynamic and reformulation of religious response, Hick develops his pluralist hypothesis. He writes of his frustration with the exclusivist and inclusivist positions in *Disputed Questions* (1993):

Some of us however... have rejected this inclusivism as an unsatisfactory compromise. We have moved to a pluralism which sees the other great world faiths as authentic and valid contexts of salvation/ liberation... Each tradition has its channel of revelation or illumination, expressed in its sacred scriptures and responded to in distinctive forms of worship or meditation and in its own unique history of individual and communal life. Muslims, Hindus and the rest are not anonymous Christians, nor are Christians anonymous Muslims, Hindus and so on.¹³⁶

Pluralism, for Hick, then is the most effective and most potentially promising avenue of religious response available to the heterogeneous religious community-at-large.

Pluralism in Action: The Work of Gandhi

To be sure, the recognition of the need for a constructive development of “inter-faith, inter-ethnic, and inter-cultural human relations” is growing more so by the day.¹³⁷

Pluralism has taken root in many forms of scholarly debate outside of the immediate realm of religion, ranging from issues of political and sociological import, to those of economic and national concern. In a world intensely polarized and increasingly afflicted

¹³⁶ p. 143.

¹³⁷ *Autobiography*, p. 322.

with discord and tragedy, the pluralist current of religious discourse can provide an avenue through which valuable solutions are reached. As we can see today, fear and violence are widespread throughout the international community and war tears at the roots of the global community. Religion—indeed, no institution—can afford to remain insular any longer.

One must ask however: How can Hick's pluralism afford to remain optimistic in the face of such destruction and utter humiliation? To what degree can pluralism actually *be implemented* within the current socio-political spectrum? Hick never provides a concrete template according to which the pluralist ideal is to be achieved. However, he does provide insight on this proposed process of pluralist-actualization through the person of Mahatma Gandhi.

Indeed, Gandhi is characterized by Hick as the embodiment of "pluralism-in-action": he describes the Indian leader as a "fusion of religion and politics."¹³⁸ For Gandhi there was "no division between religion and politics" in his practice. "True religion," the Mahatma writes, "expresses itself politically, and the only way to achieve lasting political change is through the inner transformation of masses of individuals."¹³⁹ Seeking religious expression through acts of benevolence and compassion, he championed the needs of the poor and downtrodden within Indian society.¹⁴⁰ Because Gandhi advocated the principle of *advaita*, or unity, among all of humanity, the

¹³⁸ Hick, "Gandhi..." p. 145.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 150.

¹⁴⁰ A movement predating Hick's pluralist hypothesis, Gandhi nurtured a sense of the universal *atman* within all of humanity: "I believe in *advaita*, I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives," the leader wrote. According to this idea, if there is truly "God in every man," there can be no enemy; if there is a divine spark of being inherent to the body—the body in any form—there can be no rejection of another. (For more on this, read Hick's "Gandhi..." pp. 148-161; or *Autobiography*, pp. 204-205, 210.)

application of his doctrine of fundamental commonality was possible in virtually all situations of conflict and strife.

However, Gandhi understood that “perfect” *ahimsa* was more of an ideal than a presently attainable reality: it was *becoming*, striving and ever-present in action. The social and political barriers that stood between the goal and its peaceful realization were formidable. In a region deeply divided by the caste system, unified action was nearly impossible. Yet Gandhi provided a compelling voice of religious and moral dissent behind which an entire nation could gather in the hope of freedom.

As Hick observes, many of the elements of the leader’s project have remained relevant even today, decades later, though rarely put into practice. Aside from his fundamental concern for the potential of human nature and the peaceful resolution of conflict (*ahimsa*), Gandhi was also intensely interested in issues of ecological sustainability and the preservation of life on earth, advocating self-sufficiency and consumer restraint.¹⁴¹ A participant in traditions long-since engaged in ecumenical dialogue in the Indian continent, he focused on the relation between the world faiths. “The time has now passed,” he wrote in 1905, “when the followers of one religion can stand and say, ours is the only true religion and all others are false.”¹⁴²

Gandhi did not, it is important to note, seek to instigate a violent uprising or revolt among the polity. On the contrary, his approach was based on the principle of non-

¹⁴¹ This idea was a fundamental precept of his argument for the abolishment of the caste system. “He wanted,” as Hick notes, “production by the masses rather than mass production,” thereby creating functional aid to those grossly impoverished in the “lower ranks,” the Untouchables: “(Aid) should be given in such a way as to free the recipients to help themselves...” (“Gandhi...” p. 159.) Though Gandhi never broke free from the patriarchal tradition of Indian society, he was concerned with basic issues of feminism as well. He recognized and respected the energy and support generated by women supporters of his movement, though the notion of complete gender equality was absent from his teachings.

¹⁴² As quoted from his article in *Indian Opinion*, August 26, 1905 (appearing in Hick’s “Gandhi...,” p. 160.)

violence, *ahimsa*. A Hindu term, Gandhi's use of *ahimsa* is understood as the individual's reaction against injustice "not [by] violent revolt but [through] an appeal to the best within (the oppressors) by rational argument and by disobedience to unjust laws even when this involves suffering violence and imprisonment."¹⁴³ He believed that a response of peace directed toward aggression, reason in response to emotional impulse, would prove infinitely more effective than "meeting violence with violence." Noting this, Hick reflects upon the religious and political leader:

Willingness to suffer for the sake of justice, appealing as it does to the common humanity of both oppressor and oppressed, is the moral power for which Gandhi coined the word *satyagraha*, the Power of Truth...¹⁴⁴

It was this "power of truth" that Gandhi recognized as the sole source of hope for a land divided: if individuals could overcome superficial prejudice and anger, look beyond the differences to the common goal they all shared for a free India, the independent transformation to community-consciousness was possible and the realization probable.

Gandhi understood, though, that "perfect" *ahimsa* was more of an ideal than a presently attainable reality: it was *becoming*, striving and ever-present in action. The social and political barriers that stood between the goal and its peaceful realization were formidable. In a region deeply divided by the caste system, unified action was nearly impossible. Yet Gandhi provided a compelling voice of religious and moral dissent behind which an entire nation could gather in the hope of freedom.

It is this facet of Gandhi's life and teachings which serves as physical, social and political example of Hick's pluralism in action. Though his life was cut tragically short, the leader successfully instilled a sense of the necessity of human community and the

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 154.

¹⁴⁴ "Gandhi...", p. 154.

magnanimity of compassion. Raised in a region of Jainism, Hinduism, Islam and Parsi, young Gandhi was introduced early to the “many-sidedness of reality,” the Jainist doctrine of *anekantavada*. Writing later, he observed

religions are different roads converging at the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe they were all God given and I believe they were necessary to the people to whom they were revealed.

Indeed, regarding the seemingly pointless differentiation and gradation of religions with respect to one another,¹⁴⁵ he continues:

No one faith is perfect. All faiths are equally dear to their respective votaries. What is wanted, therefore, is a living friendly contact among the followers of the great traditions of the world and not a clash among them in the fruitless attempt on the part of each community to show superiority of its own faith over the rest... Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis, Jews are convenient labels. But when I tear them down, I do not know which is which. We are all children of the same God.¹⁴⁶

As Hick observes, many of the elements of the leader’s project have remained relevant even today, decades later, though rarely put into practice. Aside from his fundamental concern for the potential of human nature and the peaceful resolution of conflict (*ahimsa*), Gandhi was also intensely interested in issues of ecological sustainability and the preservation of life on earth, advocating self-sufficiency and consumer restraint.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ This idea of complementarity exists within other philosophers’ writings as well, though the *gradation* of religions is developed as a primary focus within writings of scholars such as Ritschl. Hick does not believe in the possibility (or plausibility) of any system of gradation, due to the inherent subjectivity of religious experience: what is phenomenologically and soteriologically effective for one may not be so for another—and, according to Hick, that is perfectly acceptable. (For more on this, see Hick’s *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 67-89.)

¹⁴⁶ Both as quoted from pp. 23, 31 of Gandhi’s autobiography. (noted in Hick’s “Gandhi...,” p. 161.)

¹⁴⁷ This idea was a fundamental precept of his argument for the abolishment of the caste system. “He wanted,” as Hick notes, “production by the masses rather than mass production,” thereby creating functional aid to those grossly impoverished in the “lower ranks,” the Untouchables: “(Aid) should be given in such a way as to free the recipients to help themselves...” (“Gandhi...” p. 159.) Though Gandhi

A participant in traditions long-since engaged in ecumenical dialogue in the Indian continent, Gandhi focused on the relation between the world faiths. "The time has now passed," he wrote in 1905, "when the followers of one religion can stand and say, ours is the only true religion and all others are false."¹⁴⁸ The leader did not advocate any type of "universal" or global religion. On the contrary, he (like Hick) enjoined his audience to become better expressions of their personal faith, reflecting influence from other religious perspectives, other worldviews, in the evocative illustration/ exemplary manifestation of one's own belief system. Other faiths, other viewpoints are not to be seen as competing but rather as enriching and complementary. According to Hick, Gandhi's life exemplified "an indomitable faith in the possibility of a radically better human future if only we will learn to trust the power of fearless nonviolent openness to others and the deeper humanity, and indeed deity, within all."¹⁴⁹ By this mode of understanding, there is an incredibly powerful moral imperative directed toward both the individual and the community: insensitivity and delinquency are simply unacceptable in the modern pluralist discourse. As W.C. Smith observes, "Any position that antagonizes and alienates rather than reconciles, that is arrogant rather than humble, that promotes segregation rather than fellowship, that is unlovely, is *ipso facto* un-Christian [or Hindu or Jewish or Islamic]."¹⁵⁰ Both inter-personal and communal dialogue then is absolutely necessary in this world of highly-charged political action and religious fervor.

never broke free from the patriarchal tradition of Indian society, he was concerned with basic issues of feminism as well. He recognized and respected the energy and support generated by women supporters of his movement, though the notion of complete gender equality was absent from his teachings.

¹⁴⁸ As quoted from his article in *Indian Opinion*, August 26, 1905 (appearing in Hick's "Gandhi...", p. 160.)

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 161.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, "The Church in a Religiously Plural World," *Christianity and Plurality* p. 316.

Conclusion: Modern Pluralism— Is it Plausible? Is it Possible?

While there has yet to exist a *perfected* individual manifestation of the tenets of pluralism, Hick depicts Gandhi as the dominant figure in shaping contemporary pluralist discourse. Indeed, he goes so far as to describe Gandhi as “the biggest influence on this side of his life.”¹⁵¹ As the deceased leader’s life and work illustrate, there are many aspects of pluralist philosophy in action that remain to be fully worked out. However, his life and teachings also illustrate the potential for cooperation in a volatile socio-political climate: a model of the kind of cooperation the need for which desperately exists today. As the Middle East rages with conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, it is impossible to ignore the religious implications of the political discourse; as Americans attempt reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, the religious basis upon which national behavior and attitudes are founded cannot be disregarded: religious discrimination is no longer a valid response, and universality is impossible. Clearly, as global politics become increasingly complicated and polarized, some ground of commonality must be realized in order to maintain conversation and realize some cross-cultural, inter-personal degree of progress.

International religious diversity cannot be ignored and can no longer go unappreciated in the struggle for global community. And yet, the incredible tension that exists among religions makes their role in this search exceedingly ambiguous. As Hick and other pluralist scholars suggest, the multiplicity of human religious understandings is a testament to the range and complexity of human socio-cultural conceptual systems: it is

¹⁵¹ *Autobiography*, p. 322.

unfortunate, though, that these derivations often prove incredibly hostile toward one another. To be sure, conflicting truth-claims, historical prejudices and political disputes steadily complicate the contemporary religious landscape.

Recalling the inherent diversity of subjective religious experience, Hick writes, “different forms of religious experience justify different and often incompatible sets of beliefs.”¹⁵² In light of this widely recognized and distinctive plurality Hick’s hypothesis emerges in a truly effectual capacity. Attending to the epistemological, phenomenological and criteriological aspects of world religion, Hick has developed a responsive pluralist hypothesis that addresses the multiform religious awareness of the universe, providing an available source of inspiration for both interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue among all aspects of human existence. To be sure, Hick offers readers an optimistic interpretation of religious diversity. A visionary and idealist, he proposes hope in response to the despair of so many.

Hick’s pluralist philosophy may not ultimately supply answers to the complex range of questions pertaining to human existence; however, Hick discerns a genuine possibility of unity in opposition to discord. It is for this quality that the pluralist hypothesis must be recognized as a valid option within the context of inter-religious response and relation: feasible and faithful, the need for such a guiding global-ethic is increasingly recognized as dire. Religion, Hick argues, is manifest reality, the solution to those questions begging address. It is religious awareness only which offers the necessary hope, solace and inspiration; the prospect of love, justice and peace—necessary elements of human satisfaction.

¹⁵² *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 13.

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