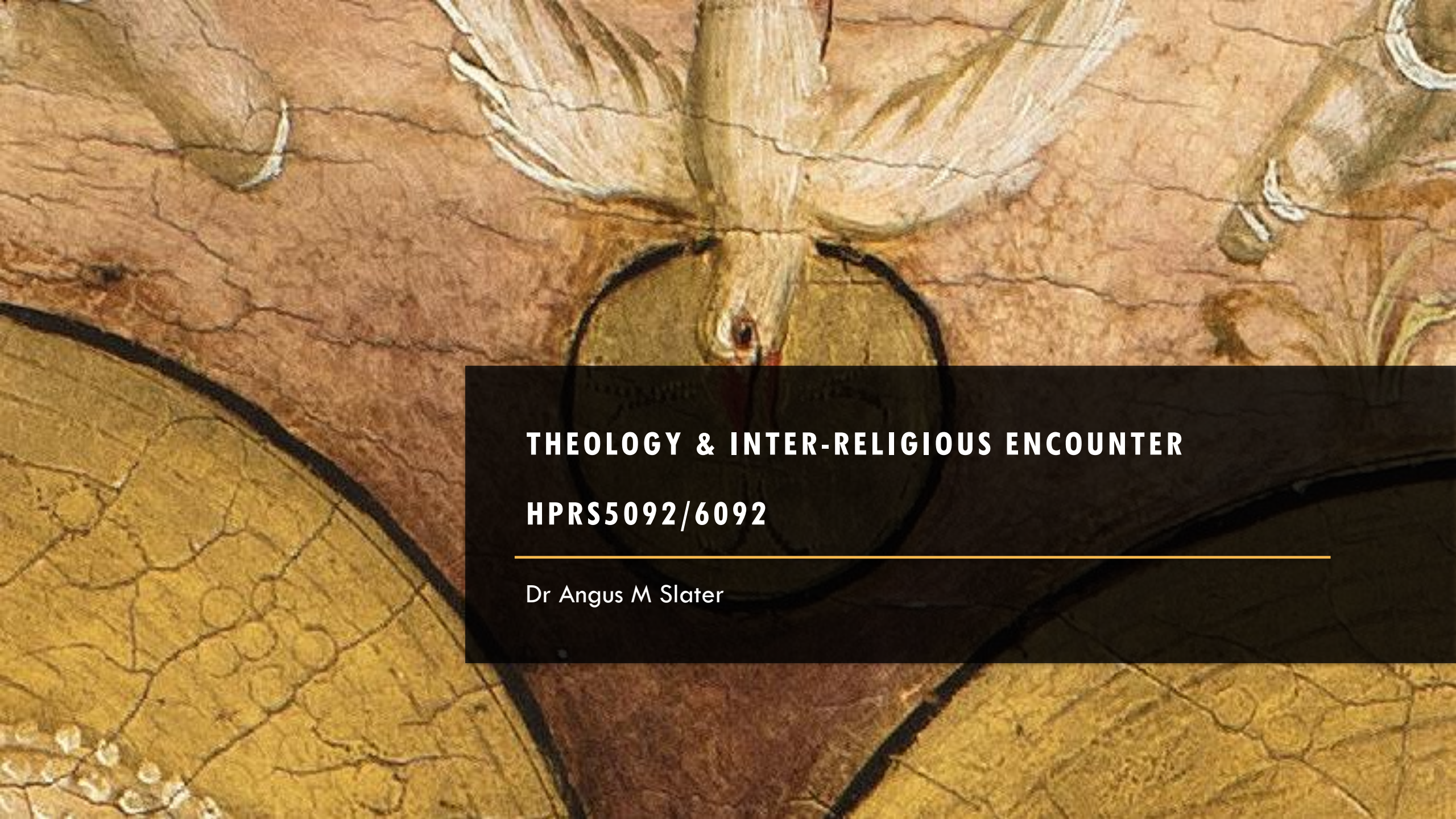




THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

HPRS5092/6092

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the previous section, we turned our attention to the position of inclusivism, within the typology of the theology of religions. Remember, these positions are theological attitudes towards the possibility to salvation, relative to other religious traditions outside the Christian one.

In that lecture, we laid out some of the key positions of inclusivism and parsed a number of differences between positions and thinkers who are aligned with it. Take the time to figure out the key differences expressed as you read through the material



REVISION

We also examined some of the historical progression of the development of the inclusivist position within the Catholic Church, particularly in response to changing circumstances around the time of the Second Vatican Council.

You also had two readings to complete — a piece by Alan Race “Christianity and Other Religions: Is Inclusivism Enough” which presents arguments around inclusivism within an ethical frame, and “Anonymous Christians” by Wong, which engages at quite a deep level with the work of Karl Rahner.



RACE A, "CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER
RELIGIONS" & WONG J, "ANONYMOUS
CHRISTIANS"

RACE A, “CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS” & WONG J, “ANONYMOUS CHRISTIANS”

Both readings, but particularly the reading by Wong, J pack a great deal of quite technical theology into a small space and really bear quite close reading.

They aim to introduce you to the diversity and variety to be found within the inclusivist position as well as beginning to tease out some of the theological implications of this variety for the Christian tradition — these differences really matter to the overall conceptualisation of the nature of Christianity.



The clue to why this is so lies in Küng's Christology. Christ, he says, is 'ultimately decisive, definitive, archetypal for man's relations with God . . .'.⁸ By 'decisive' here he means not unsurpassably unique, but acting as normative, the measure against which other religious revealers require to be tested. 'Normativeness' is a concept which fits in better with an historical age, as it seems to avoid conflict with *a priori* notions of religious truth. So Jesus, in this view, represents the clearest expression of God's love for the world, a love which is everywhere operative, yet not dependent on the *sine qua non* of the incarnation to be real and effective. The superiority of the Christian way is retained, but in the form of its being normatively decisive. But even this form of normative decisiveness in Christology remains problematic in an historically conscious age. For according to the historical method, the sense in which Christ can be said to be normatively decisive can only be established after a lengthy period of dialogue and mutual critical questioning. Küng saw this, and switched to dialogue as the means for establishing a new inclusivism. But he failed to follow through its implications in Christology when he assumed the superiority of Christ *a priori*.

RACE A, “CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS”

What are the main differences between the inclusivism of Rahner and Kung?

Why do these differences matter?

Is inclusivism always producing tension between the two desires?

work which this form of the doctrine of the incarnation will not do. If Jesus is the goal of what it means to be human, then this is still a judgement from within one historical religious setting. Without showing how Jesus is such a goal, in comparison with other moments of revelation, the claim only reinforces the *a priori* nature of Rahner's Christology. D'Costa, however, does not apologize for the impropriety of Rahner's theory at this point; he seeks to supply what Rahner omitted, that is, some *a posteriori* historical backing for a rather abstract dogmatic argument. In spite of the obvious hermeneutical complexities of the task, it is possible, he believes, to discern that orientation towards Christ within the other religions, necessary in any full statement of the anonymous Christianity theory. Using work such as that of Raimundo Panikkar, he demonstrates this possibility in relation, for example, to Hinduism.

RACE A, “CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS”

What is the problem with Rahner's thought here?

What is D'Costa trying to do?

How does this relate to our notions of what religion is?

RAHNER'S ANONYMOUS CHRISTIANS AND DIFFERENT APPROACHES

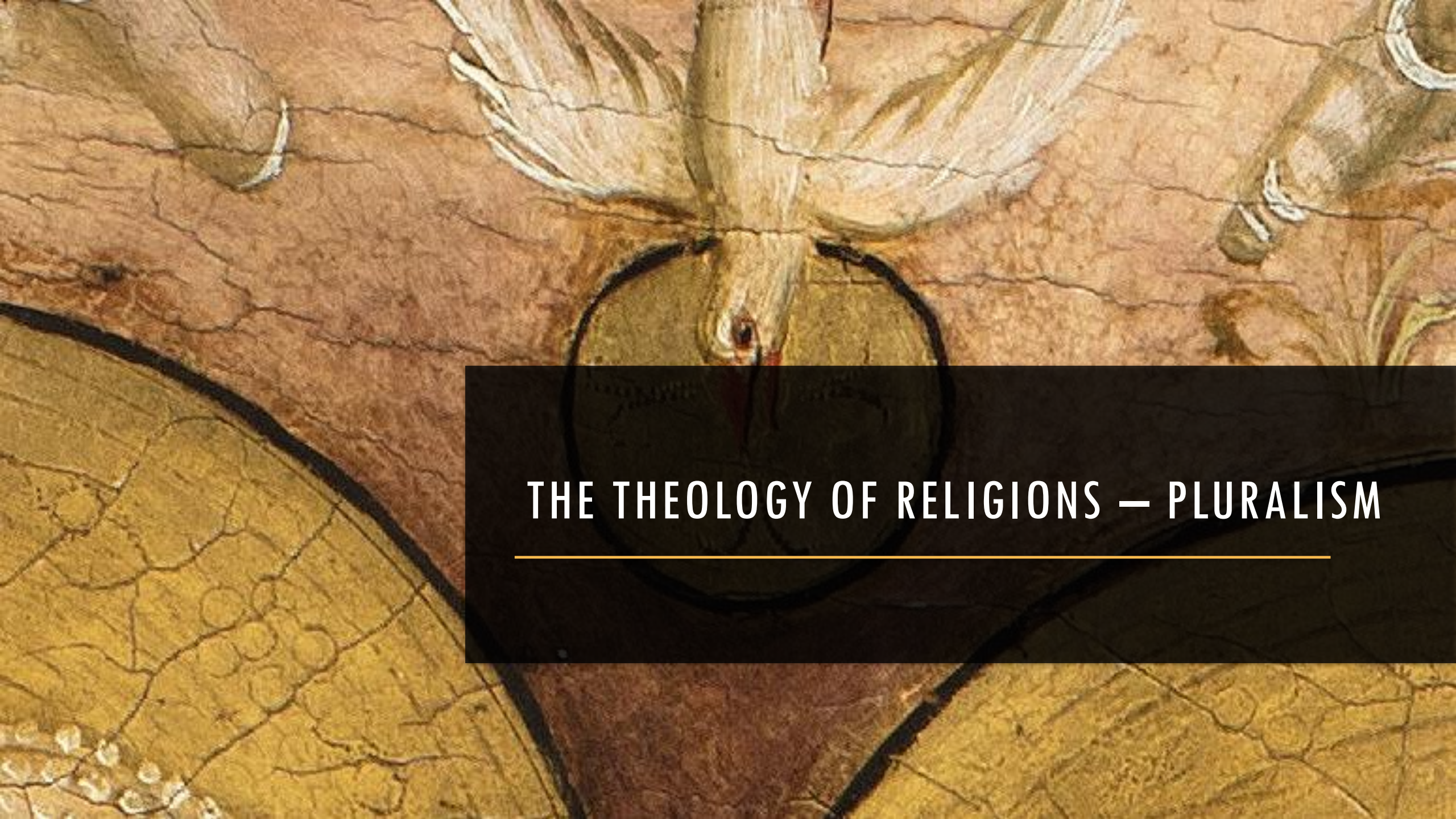
In order that we may better appreciate Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians, it would be helpful to situate his teaching in the context of different approaches in the debate. There have been several attempts to classify the various positions according to some basic models. Peter Schineller, for example, distinguishes the different views as ecclesiocentric, Christocentric, and theocentric.⁷ Some theologians have made use of other paradigms for their classification, i.e. exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.⁸ I find it useful to combine the two classifications by proposing the following paradigms with a particular type of Christology attached to each: *ecclesiocentric-exclusivist view* with an exclusive Christology, *Christocentric-inclusivist view* with a constitutive or a normative Christology, and *theocentric-pluralist view* with a nonnormative Christology.⁹ Moreover, I shall present one or two theologians as representatives of each paradigm.

WONG J, “ANONYMOUS CHRISTIANS”

What are:
Ecclesiocentric-exclusivism
Christocentric-inclusivism
Theocentric-pluralism

Why might these terms be chosen?

What is the aim of classifying
theologies this way?



THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS — PLURALISM

PLURALISM

So, what is the position of 'pluralism' within the theology of religions and what exactly does it mean?

Generally, proponents of pluralism would answer positively to the question – can non-Christians be saved by their own religions? – and differ about the mechanisms / extent to which this accomplished.

Pluralists (meaning those who hold the position of pluralism) would generally argue that multiple traditions can lead to salvation, but differ on whether this salvation is the same across differing religious traditions, is different according to individual traditions, as well as exactly how and what this 'salvation' is.

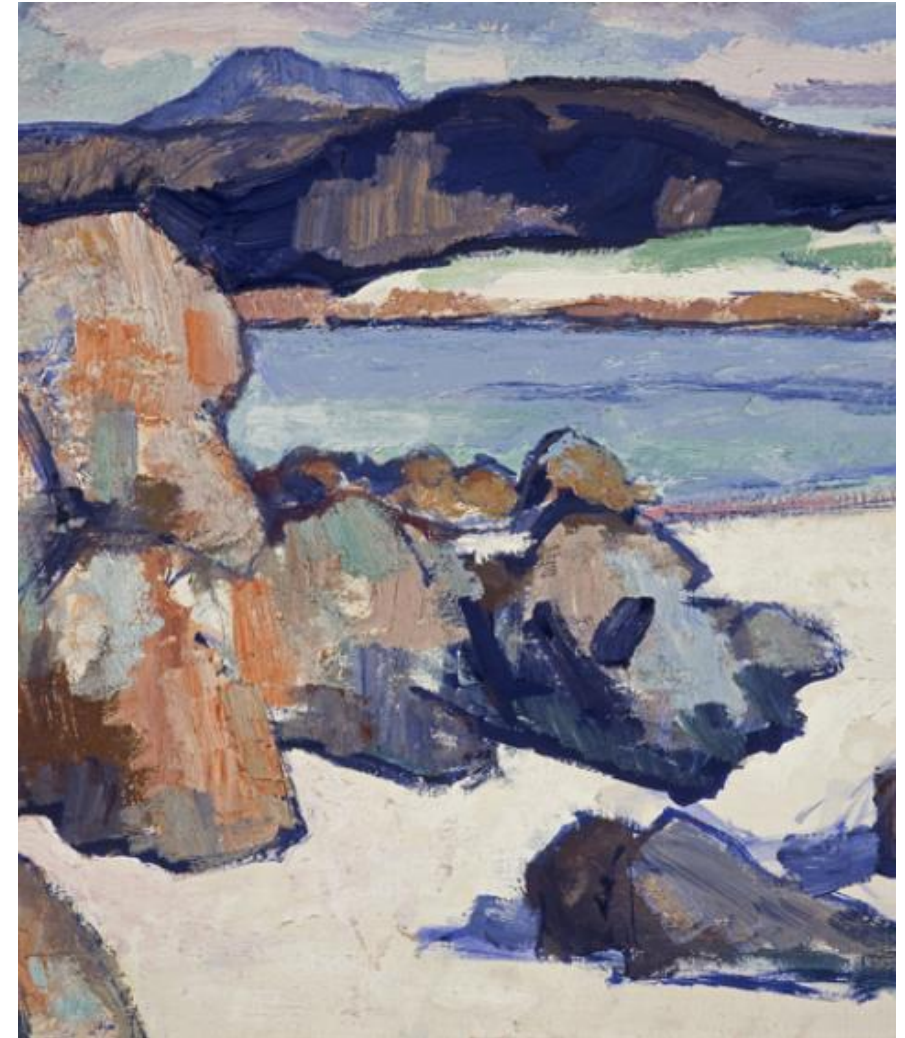


PLURALISM

While pluralism, as I am sure you have picked up so far, can be easily summarised as a version of ‘All religions lead to the same ultimate truth in some way’ it is worth remembering this this is not some neutral proposal of nothingness, or a “let’s all agree to be nice” option – it is just as ideological as the other two positions.

Just like inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is a truth claim.

It proposes a theory about the way that things “are” just like they do.



PLURALISM

While the pluralist view generally recognises the validity of the different major world religions (and non-religious worldviews) as all having some connection to a shared reality, just as with Exclusivism and Inclusivism, different versions of Pluralism have different versions of what that “Ultimate Truth” is, how graspable by human intellect it is, and a whole host of other disagreements.

However, given the shared accessibility of the Ultimate Truth, Pluralists generally believe that people of different faiths can learn from one another and faith is enriched by dialogue – together we can more fully understand the shared reality.



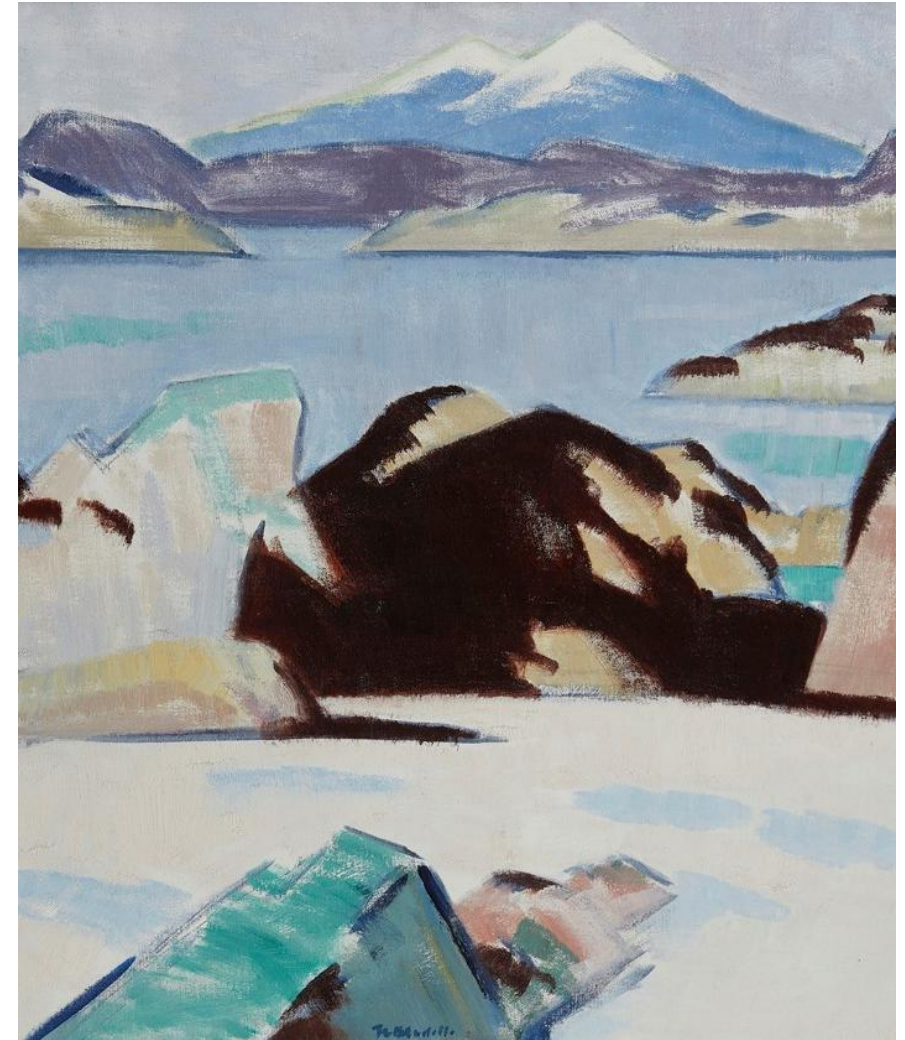
PLURALISM

Some versions of pluralism believe that all religions are only able to offer partial revelation of the divine, some that they all share the same revelation of the divine, some that none of the religions have any claim to the divine.

This can pose issues for pluralism – how do we pick and evaluate between the different religions and their very different conceptions of the world?

If we say that both Islam and Christianity offer the totality of the divine, how do we explain very apparent and obvious differences in teaching?

If we say all religions have some revelation, do we then say that some (e.g. Judaism) have more than others (e.g. Scientology?)

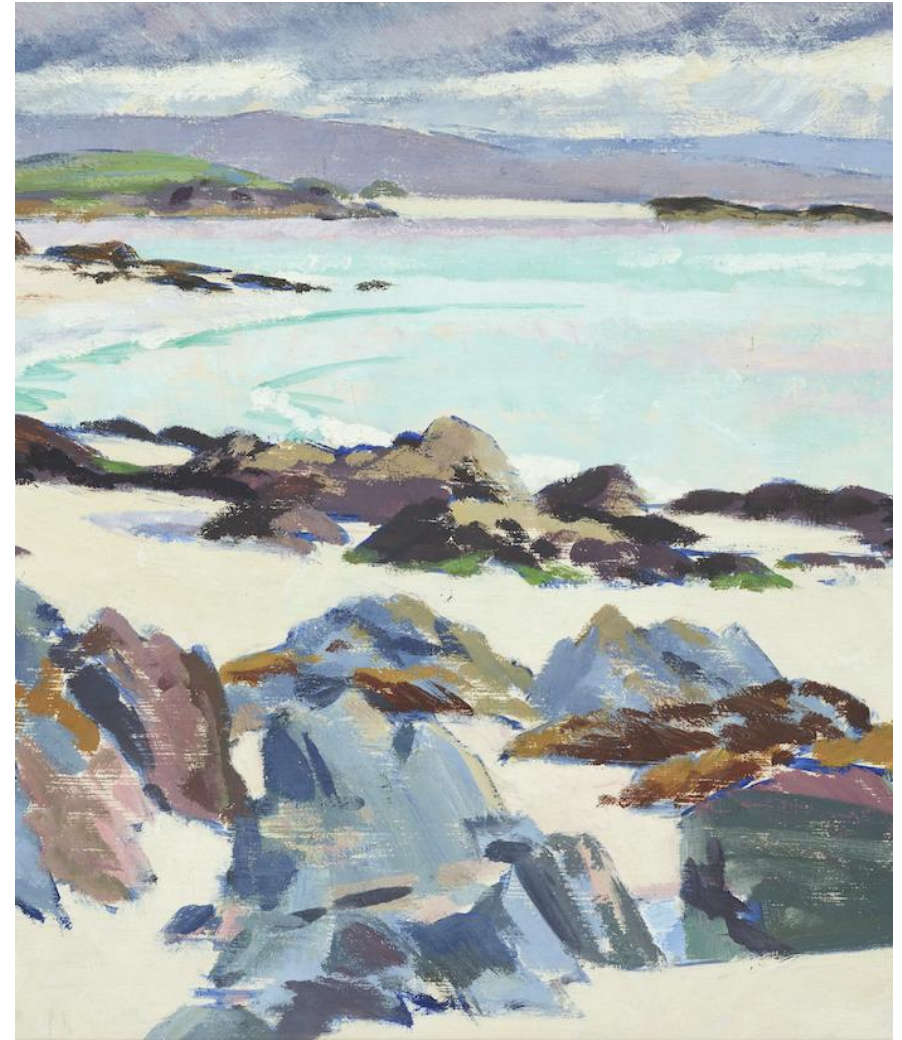


PLURALISM

Generally, pluralism is a more modern theological position than the other two, in that its main proponents arise later in history.

As a definable position, especially within Christian theology, it arises primarily as a response to the work of both Alan Race and John Hick – who you may have come across already.

This is partly because Pluralism has an uncomfortable relation to the category of theology – if we remember our definitions of theology, the aim of pluralism is problematic, as it disrupts the centrality of the Christian tradition.



PLURALISM

It is worth taking some time to ground our understanding of pluralism, as expressed within the typology of the theology of religions, as the term is often used in different contexts – e.g. social pluralism or political pluralism.

While the statement - *All religions lead to the same ultimate truth in some way* – may appear simple, we have seen it can pose issues of imposition, categorisation, multiplicity of truth, and valuation within a theological context.

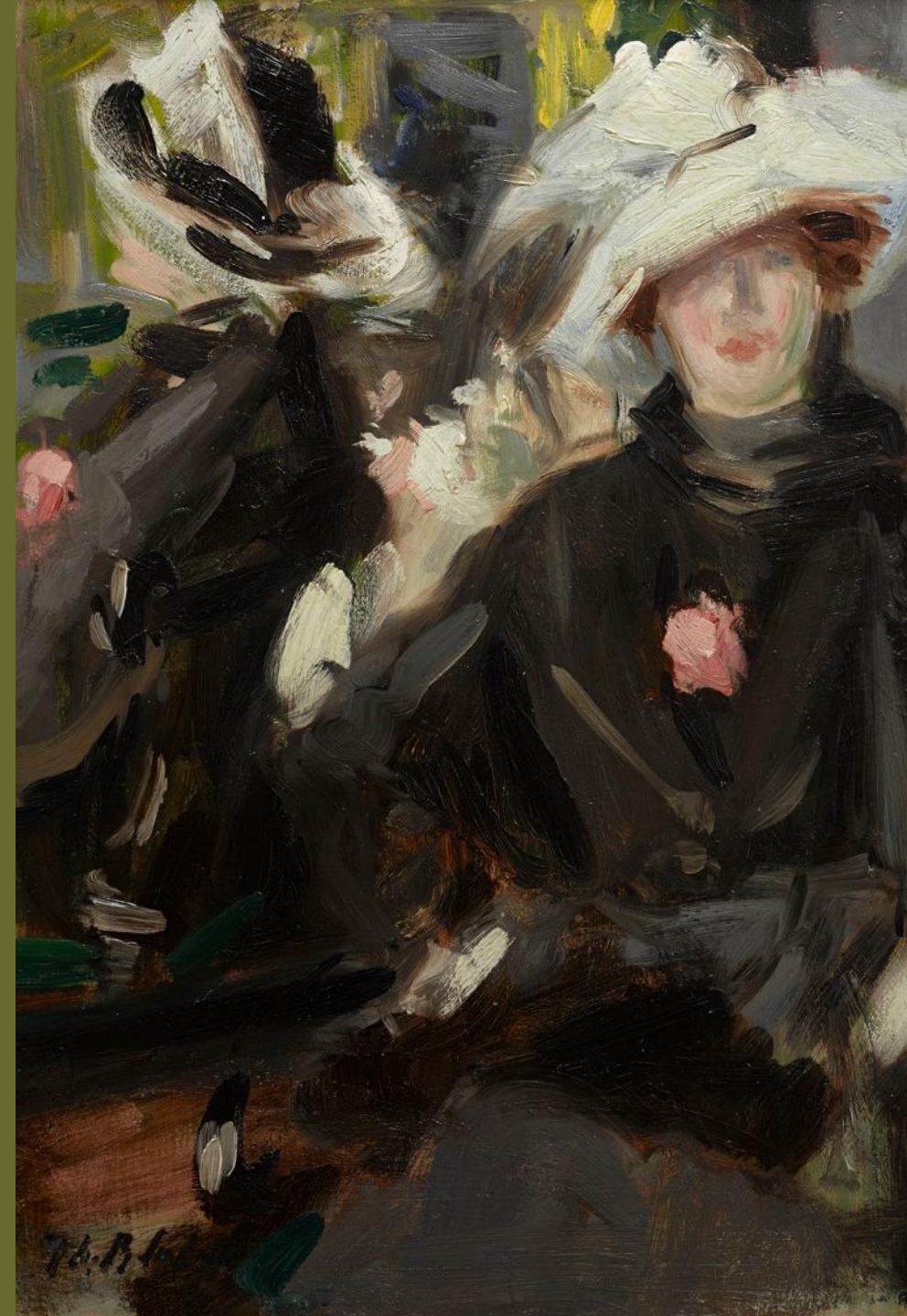
Be wary of definitions like the opposite which elide these specific concerns and utilise the term in a more social / ethical way.

Religious
pluralism
is accepting,
celebrating,
and learning
from diverse
religions.

PLURALISM

As with inclusivism, there are many different shades of opinion and argument which populate the typological category of pluralism, with a variety of different emphases and particular distinctions that relate to the question of salvation.

In the next section, I want to highlight just a few thinkers of pluralism which differ from each other — both in terms of their own religious traditions and backgrounds, and in the specific mechanisms by which they propose the inclusion of non-Christian others to occur.

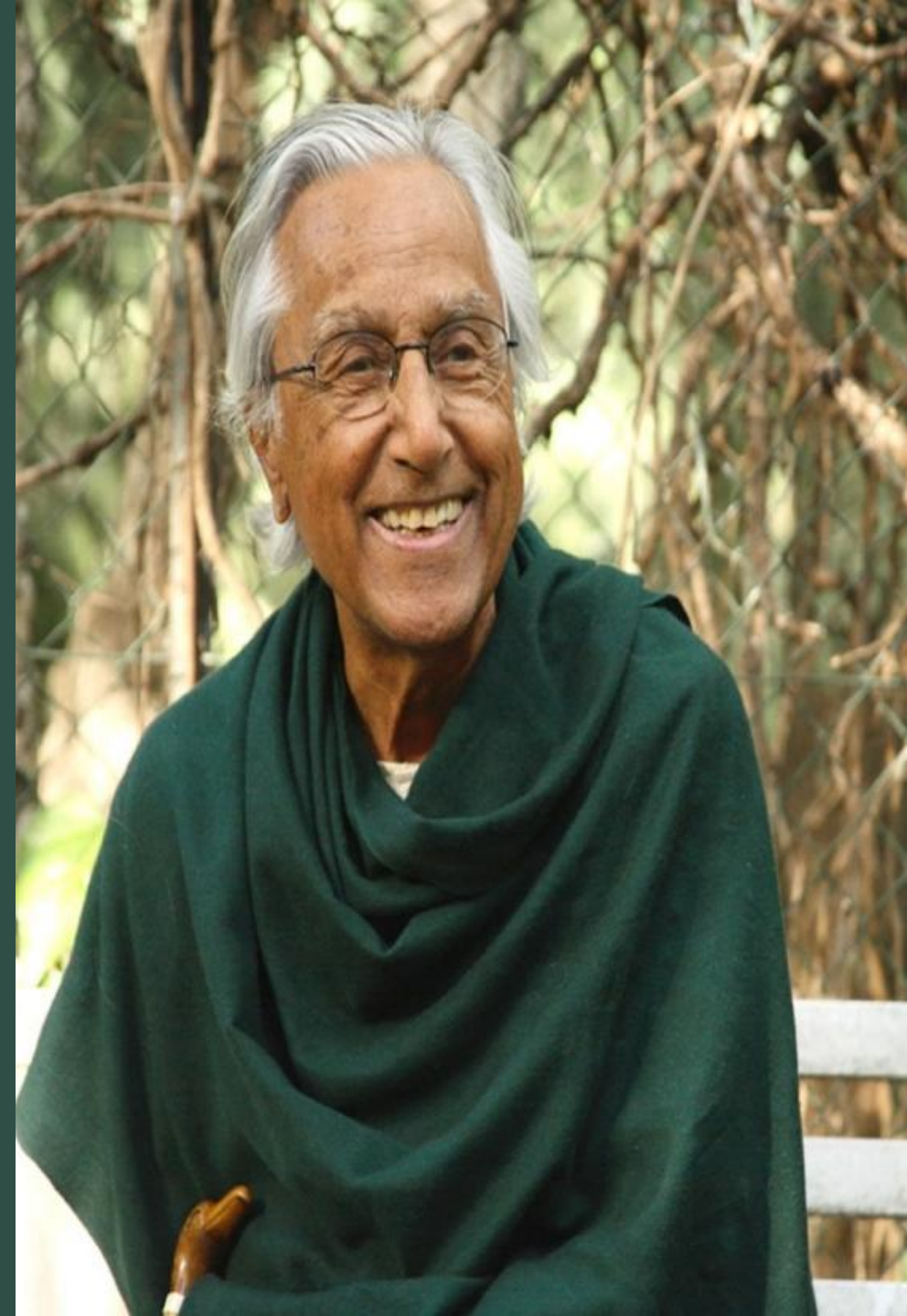


PLURALISTS — PANIKKAR, KNITTER, HICK, &
HEIM

RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR

Raimundo Pannikar was brought up in Spain and educated in a Jesuit school. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1946. In the 1950s he went to live in India where he engaged in dialogue with Hindus.

It was this encounter that led to his adoption of the theological position of pluralism. Pannikar came to believe that there is no such thing as truth that is accessible to us; there are only truths.



RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR

For Panikkar, the central commitment is that Reality is beyond human thought. Therefore, there can be no universal theory of religion that adequately expresses the totality of this Reality. Expressions of God's Being such as the Trinity are a Christian symbol for the unnameable Absolute.

Therefore, Christians should be open to learning from other traditions, in order to come to a better understanding of the nature of Reality.

For example, Christian theology can learn from the Hindu Upanishads about the omnipresence of God, while Hinduism could learn from Christian understandings of the Incarnation.



RAIMUNDO PANIKKAR

Panikkar writes:

“Pluralism is not a theoretical system or an attitude that respects religious diversity, but an attitude that respects the freedom of reality to transcend our systematizing efforts to contain and define it. It actively resists the tendency to absolutise any claims to validity.”

This is a theological position in line with aspects of the ‘via negativa’ of medieval theology — which refuted our ability to adequately say anything about the divine that did not fail to fully encapsulate the divine.

We can only describe what God is not, rather than what God is



PAUL KNITTER

Paul Knitter is a Catholic theologian who, over the course of his career, moved from a position of religious exclusivism to one of religious pluralism.

Knitter's best known book is '*No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*' which engages with the theology of religions, while he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Paul Althaus.

Even at this early stage, we find early expressions of his later pluralism.



PAUL KNITTER

It is in his edited book of 1987 '*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*' where Knitter argues that pluralism is a viable expression of Christian theology.

A number of eminent contemporary theologians contributed to the book such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Raimundo Panikkar.

In this book the contributors argued that salvation is effective in its particular way across a variety of religions. Religions represent culturally disparate responses to the Real or the Absolute; each of these offers a different path to salvation.



JOHN HICK

John Hick was originally a conservative evangelical Christian whose theology has gradually moved to a position of pluralism. His thinking began to change when he began teaching philosophy at Birmingham University in the late 1960s, when he encountered people of other faiths such as Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism.

In 1973 he published a book entitled *God and the Universe of Faiths*, in which he called for a paradigm shift in the way in which we think about religions. In this book he argued that each of the world's religions should be regarded as different, but valid responses, to one divine Reality.



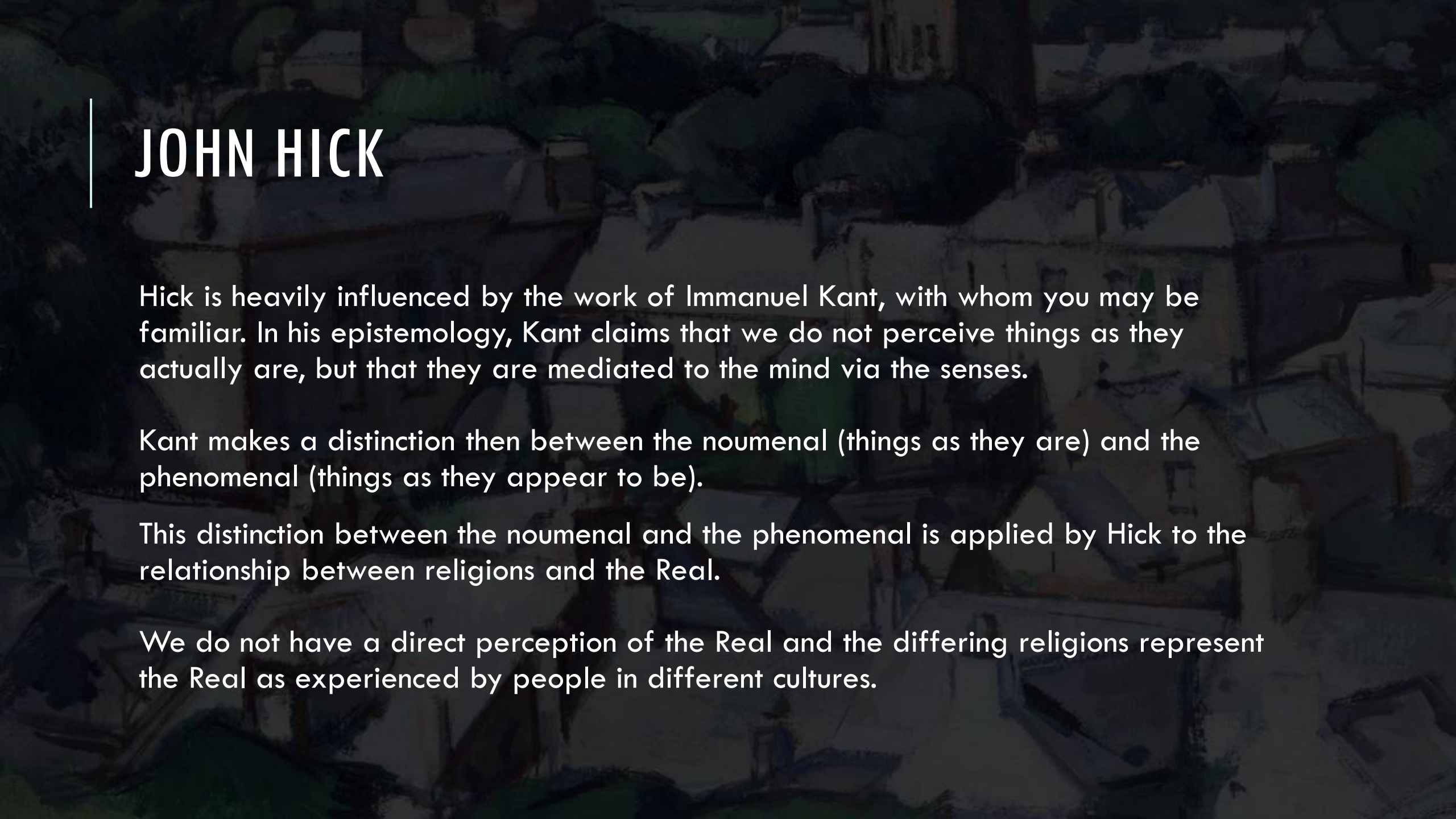
JOHN HICK

However, this acceptance of other traditions is accompanied by a rejection of the orthodox doctrines of Christianity which has posed issues for the acceptance of his work in Christian circles.

In his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* Hick argues that the doctrine of the incarnation does not point to a real event – that is, the event of God becoming human.

Hick does not support the traditional Chalcedonian position on the incarnation, because he regards the idea of a being who is both divine and human to be philosophically incoherent, which places much of his other work beyond a “pure” Christian framing.





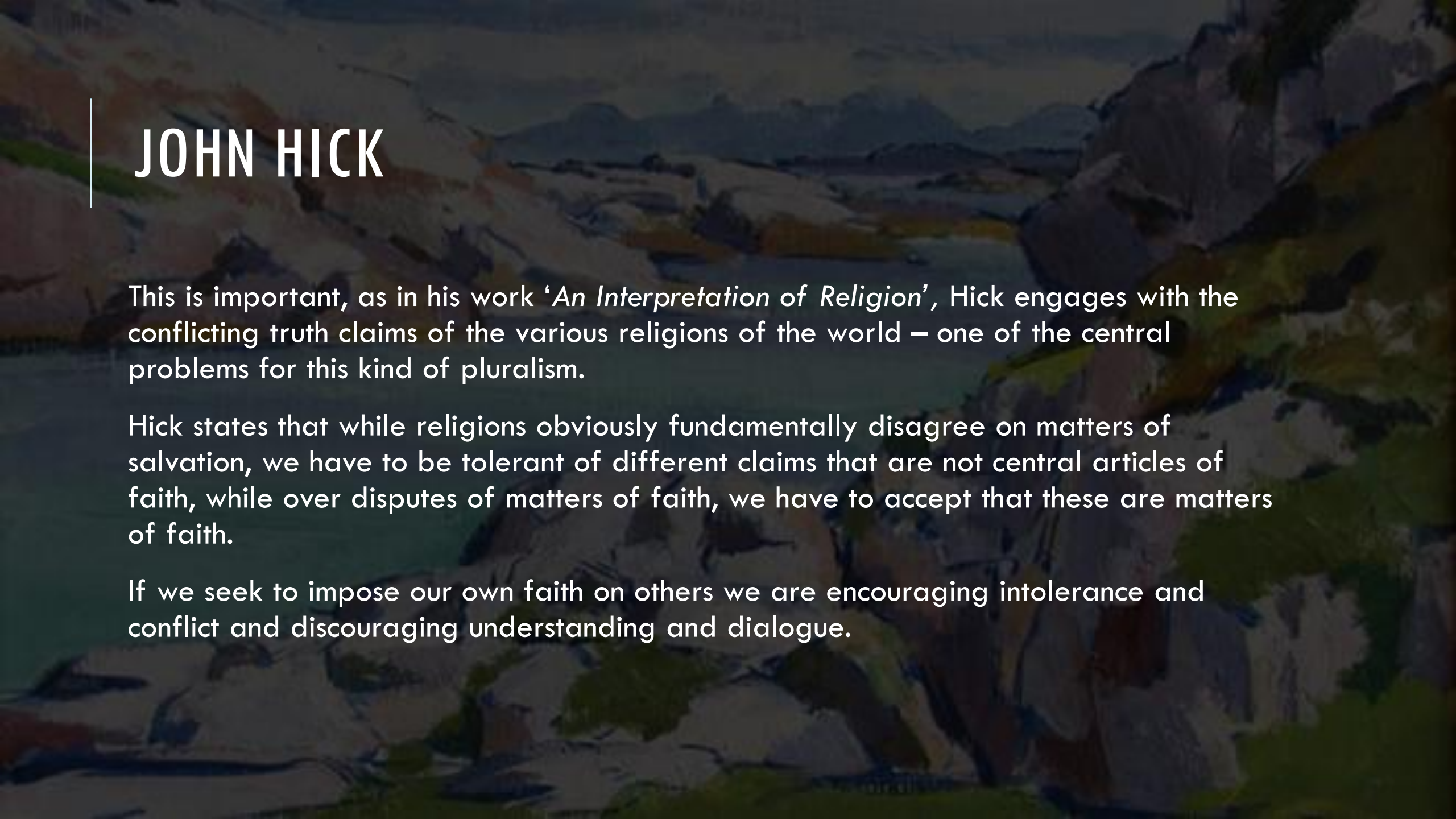
JOHN HICK

Hick is heavily influenced by the work of Immanuel Kant, with whom you may be familiar. In his epistemology, Kant claims that we do not perceive things as they actually are, but that they are mediated to the mind via the senses.

Kant makes a distinction then between the noumenal (things as they are) and the phenomenal (things as they appear to be).

This distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal is applied by Hick to the relationship between religions and the Real.

We do not have a direct perception of the Real and the differing religions represent the Real as experienced by people in different cultures.



JOHN HICK

This is important, as in his work '*An Interpretation of Religion*', Hick engages with the conflicting truth claims of the various religions of the world – one of the central problems for this kind of pluralism.

Hick states that while religions obviously fundamentally disagree on matters of salvation, we have to be tolerant of different claims that are not central articles of faith, while over disputes of matters of faith, we have to accept that these are matters of faith.

If we seek to impose our own faith on others we are encouraging intolerance and conflict and discouraging understanding and dialogue.

JOHN HICK

Hick therefore advocates a pluralist position within the theology of religions that does not ascribe an exclusive truth claim to any one tradition.

Throughout his work (there is a LOT), Hick argues that the different faiths represent different expressions of the same Real and that we cannot know for certain which is true, or truer, than the others.

For Hick, the Real and therefore authentic religion, represents a movement away from a condition of self-centredness to one of other-centredness.

This is what Hick's understanding of what salvation is and it is what allows him to draw a line between "acceptable" religion and "unacceptable" religion.

How convincing do you find this?



MARK HEIM

An interesting alternative position within the pluralist milieu is that of Mark Heim who critiques religious pluralism on the grounds that pluralistic theologies of religions, such as Hick, postulate a conception of salvation that is applicable to all religions – e.g that the statement “All religions lead to the same ultimate truth in some way” pre-supposes a single ultimate truth and a single form of salvation.

That is to say, religious pluralism is insufficiently pluralistic. In contrast, Heim proposes a more pluralistic hypothesis, which argues for a conceptualisation of multiple different forms and methods of salvation – that salvation for each of us may differ in content and method according to our own beliefs.



READING

You have two readings to complete, both of which provide a good introduction to questions in the study of the pluralist position. The first is a general and useful overview of the nature of pluralism, while the second is a more critical approach to attempting to ask questions of Hick's proposals:

McKim, R. (2012). "Pluralism" In McKim, R., 'On Religious Diversity', Oxford University Press

Howard-Snyder, D. (2017) "Who or What is God, According to John Hick?", *Topoi*, 36(4), 571-586.

