

## **Book Review for ‘the Journal of Interreligious Studies’**

**John Hick. *The Rainbow of Faiths*. (Chatham, Kent: SCM Press Ltd, 1995)**

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John Hick was an English theologian and philosopher of religion who made significant contribution to the area of religious pluralism. This book is an expanded version of the Auburn lectures delivered by Hick in 1994 at Union Theological Seminary, in an attempt to answer the criticisms arising from his concept of religious pluralism. Hick delivers his view on why pluralism is possible and could be attractive to both Christians and non-Christians. The main chapters (2-5) are presented in dialogue form, with two fictional characters, Phil, the philosopher and Grace, the theologian, representing skepticism from these two areas towards religious pluralism.

In chapter one, a brief introduction to Hick’s pluralist hypothesis is given. Hick states the reasons for the need to adopt religious pluralism in this day and age. It is true that the explosion of information and globalisation have reshaped the view and understanding of many on world religions other than Christianity, the ever growing and developing theological framework is likely to evolve over time. Hick believes that salvation can be perceived as an actual change in human beings with respect to its moral fruits and religions should serve the purpose of ‘transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a recentring in the Ultimate Reality’ (p. 18). The book evidences Hick’s notable well rounded knowledge of the fundamentals and core teachings of different religions, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism. His pluralistic hypothesis entails that no one religion should claim unique superiority, different religions respond to one ineffable Real but are experienced in their corresponding concepts and practices due to the varied human conceptions of the Real. Hick claims that the Real should be considered ineffable as its nature is beyond the scope of human conceptual systems. Kant’s idea on the distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal world is used to support Hick’s argument.

Chapters two and three focus on Hick’s response to criticisms from the philosophical perspective. Clearly, Hick agrees to a certain extent from the post-modernist’s critique that religious pluralism’s emergence is a result of the newly arisen awareness of the “one world idea” after the European colonial hegemony ended, with hidden agenda for political and economic interest; however, he draws from various historical and religious textual background, as well as from eminent thinkers like Gandhi and Dalai Lama to prove that the pluralistic idea has ancient roots (pp. 34-37). “Philosopher” Phil raises the question that religious pluralism attempts to homogenise different religious traditions into one unity by inevitably suppressing their mutual otherness (p.40). Hick explains that it’s not the intention of his pluralistic hypothesis; rather, all religions ‘presuppose a profound present lack, and the possibility of a radically better future. And they provide the ways to get from one to the other’ (p. 41). This is one factual statement, different manifestations of the Real are not necessarily conflicting beliefs. Hick’s pluralism is not aiming for a new global religion; acknowledging that the existing world religions respond to one Ultimate Real should not stop the respective

adherents to experience and conceive the Real in their own distinctive and particular ways, in the spiritual, moral and cultural aspects. Hick further uses Kantian analogy (the persona or impersona of different faiths are phenomenal manifestations of the noumenal Real-in-itself) to explicate that the various conception of the divine are partly a human projection (p. 46), but as he is employing only the basic thought rather than Kant's entire system, the rationality of his contention in this regard is questionable.

When faced with query on conflicting metaphysical beliefs of different faiths, such as the origin of the universe or life after death, Hick seems rather skeptical, stating that no one can be certain about the reality of these matters, so they are just opinions that are not necessary for salvation (p52). He somewhat inappropriately uses Buddha's teaching about the 'undetermined questions' to support his viewpoint (p52). From a Buddhist's perspective, Buddha asks to not chase after certain answers for the practice of non-attachment so as to gradually attain emptiness, not because certain beliefs are not important and can be ignored. In fact, the metaphysical belief of reincarnation in Buddhism acts as a reminder of karma, hence directly shapes the spiritual and everyday lives of practicing Buddhists. Similarly, when discussing the conflicting historical truth-claims, Hick does not proffer sufficient information on historical instances and underestimates the level of their impact.

Chapter 3 addresses the question on the ineffability of the Real. Hick uses a number of quotations from various religions, including Christianity, to acknowledge that the Real surpasses the comprehension of the intellectual human mind and has its own nature (p. 62). But this nature can be experienced through the worship or meditation towards the different manifestations of the same noumenal Real, namely the personae or impersonae (p. 65). Moreover, Hick clarifies the reason for his proposal of one Real: the evident similarity in the desired transformed human state (p. 69) described in the various faiths suggests a common source of salvific transformation. The conflicting issue of monotheism and polytheism is also addressed. Phil asks Hick to set criteria for an appropriate response to the Real. The main ideas proposed involve the transformation of self-centredness to a new centring in the Real, with this new centring being built upon ethical criteria, especially in the delivery of love and compassion to others. Unexpectedly and commendably, Hick also finds the presence of the Real in non-religious groups, such as humanists or Marxists. Those who work unselfishly for a better human future are responding to the Real and are undergoing the salvific transformation (p. 81). This substantiates that Hick's response to the Real is associated with the creation of justice and peace for society, these ideas will indeed encourage and facilitate interreligious studies and collaboration.

Theological objections to religious pluralism can be found in chapters four and five, mainly with questions directed towards uniqueness of incarnation and salvation. In Christianity, Jesus is the God incarnate; Hick believes this does not entitle the Christian church to claim unique superiority, as there is the idea of a plurality of divine incarnations, once put forward by theologian Thomas Aquinas. For the Christian portrayal of Jesus, Hick further challenges that the authors of the Gospels were not among Jesus' original twelve disciples and the Gospels were written decades after his death. Hick criticises the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation, he would rather view Jesus as 'a man who was open to God's presence to a truly

awesome extent... (pp. 91-92). By drawing from the Hebrew scriptures, Hick justifies that the term 'son of God' should not be intended literally but as a metaphor (p. 94). The possibility of Jesus' coexistence of divine and human nature is questioned; Hick also mentions that the deification of Jesus has been used to justify evils throughout history. All of the aforementioned ideas are intended to inform that the God incarnate in Christianity need not be regarded as the only divine incarnate on this human land, divine incarnates of other religions should also be recognised and respected.

While Hick suggests that a common soteriological structure exists for all the great religions, the "theologian" Grace faults him for overlooking the profound diversity of the ultimate aims of the religions, using the distinctive Christian salvation as an example. Hick supports his hypothesis by emphasising that the seemingly different aims all point to a limitlessly better state from the current unsatisfactory state, the various moral and spiritual paths are all forms of a gradual salvific transformation from self-centredness to a new centring in the Real (p. 107). This repeatedly underlined concept appears to be the key principle in his hypothesis. Religious teachings do not have to be absolute and eternal truths but can be seen as human ideas that facilitate our spiritual development (p. 115), Hick uses the Buddhist theory of 'skilful means' to support this idea. So salvation, a rather exclusive Christian term, when defined by Hick as a human transformation, becomes much more fitting for his pluralistic theory. In this book, Hick has confined himself to the discussion of only the centuries-old religions; the multitude of new and small religions is yet to be studied in respect of their formation and ultimate aims. Towards the end of chapter five, Hick expresses his enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue. On the precondition of not meaning to convert others, he encourages the learning and distribution of different religious sacred scriptures and emphasises the value in sharing and comparing ideas, histories and experiences between people of different faiths. Undoubtedly, this form of gracious interreligious interaction could enrich one another, reduce conflicts and gradually improve the current situation of religious unique superiority. I believe this is one of the focal aims that Hick's pluralistic theory wishes to achieve.

The final chapter of this book offers a rather interesting outlook on the new state of Christianity in year 2056, by then, Christians would see itself as one true religion among others (p. 135) and further changes in the framework of the Christian Church have taken place in various aspects (pp. 135-137). In this thought-experiment, Hick also predicts emergence of new forms of religion and that interfaith cooperation would become widespread, especially in the work for social justice and world peace. Hick urges us to become aware of the enormous wealth of spiritual writings of human kind; and he finishes the book with a small collection of religious texts from different faiths. It offers an impressive bibliography for those who are interested.

*The Rainbow of Faiths* is a great introduction to Hick's religious pluralistic theory. Although Hick's response to the critics from the philosophical and theological fields demonstrated in this book may not be entirely successful, some lack substantial supporting evidence and some repeatedly use the same concept of one Real. But for anyone who is interested in learning more about religious pluralism and its existing criticism may find this book informative. Another distinctive feature of the book is Hick's extensive knowledge on the religious

teachings other than that of Christianity, especially the oriental religions; this may prove to be useful for interreligious dialogue.