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Expound and assess John Hick's thesis of religious pluralism

Introduction

The belief or hope that there is something more to human life is found in many cultures. Religions have come into existence in a yearning to know the ultimate meaning of human lives and understand the transcendent. History gives evidence of figures who have claimed to have known the creator, 'the eternal' and unfold the path towards salvation. Sometimes these figures have become founding fathers for religions while at other times various other sources have been effective in inspiring faith and giving alternate ways to overcome human misery and acquire peace and enlightenment. Many faiths are exclusive in their claims propagating monopoly towards salvation, while others are more inclusive allowing and acknowledging the existence of other religions in the larger schema of the grand vision. However, as the vision, worldviews, and orientations between faiths differ, they also give rise to contradictory claims. Many theologians have attempted to bridge this gap between religions by advocating pluralistic theories which bind people together. John Hick is one of the theologians advocating his classic theory of religious pluralism.

This paper explains and analysis the effectivity of John Hick's theory of religious pluralism. Based on the validity of its claims, support or criticisms it has received and the consistency of its defence, the theory will be appraised to validate the achievement of its potential objectives. Through his theory of religious pluralism, John Hick aspired to harmonize internal differences between religions by connecting the religious communities through various commonalities that each propounded. In conclusion, it could be examined that, the theory has received more adversaries and criticisms than defenders. The essay analyzed the three major and two minor forms criticisms based on the inconsistencies pointed out by the academic community. It was assessed that Hick's theory is effective if perceived as a hypothesis for point one which is conflicting truth claims. It is also validated as a 'general ideology of nature of religious

traditions.’ However, it is appraised to be ineffective when challenged on grounds of common soteriological goal and theological agnosticism. On counts of minor criticisms, the theory found inadequate supporters to defend itself from the charge of being in disharmony with exclusivist and rather was labelled as another form of exclusivism

Introduction to John Hick:

Professor John Harwood Hick was one of the most influential religious philosophers of the 20th century. In 1957 when he wrote his first book *‘Faith and Knowledge’*, his views were more traditional orthodox Christian, But later in life as he moved to Birmingham and traveled to Asian countries, his religious outlook took on a more pluralistic perspective. In his later books, *‘The Myth of God Incarnate’* and *‘The Metaphor of God Incarnate’* (1977), Hick espouses his theory of religious pluralism. (Cheetham, 2012, 1). Hick has been significantly influenced by Kant’s philosophy while developing his ideas for religious pluralism. He admits using Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction to develop his theory of religious pluralism. (Ruston, 2015, 8-9). Hick was proclaimed as heretic due to this theory. He names a state he underwent as a ‘Copernican revolution’ in which he rejects the claims of Christian exclusivist position of placing the Christian theory at the center while other religions at the periphery. He also rejects the theory of Incarnation and suggests that the twentieth century requires a theological reformation. He writes in his book, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), Jesus ‘a man approved by God as opposed to Him being God Incarnate being a myth expressed as a poetic and mythological way to know its significance’ (Ruston, 2015, 14). Let us now move towards his views on religious pluralism.

Hick's views religious pluralism

Hick expressed in the words of Rumi a 13th-century Sufi thinker, “The lamps are different, but the light is the same: it comes from beyond. He further explains that “world religions share the

basic belief in a higher reality.. that transcends the material universe and yet can be encountered through the depth of our own being”. In his paper, Hick states that all religions also share the basic belief that the complete human existence is just a part of a much larger life and that all religions share the central values of love, compassion, and justice as values to be embodied and practiced as a practical expression of faith. He maintains that each faith believes in a ‘profound sense of mystery’ which is beyond human comprehension, however, we can conceive it and experience it in some revelatory moments. Each faith follows from its own “founding events, historicity’s, paradigmatic figures, sacred writings, spiritual formations, intellectual formulations, distinctive ethos, and institutional forms” however, he postulates that each faith is a different response to knowing and understanding the “ineffable ultimate reality”. Hick further asserts that individuals born in a particular faith should practice their “inherited tradition” to fully utilize the spiritual resources of that tradition to realize the ultimate reality. While adherents of one faith also need to recognize similar principals of other people who are practitioners of different faith traditions, he believes that all religions should be perceived as independent, authentic and valid and of the equal significance of one’s own tradition. (2004, 253-254)

Central themes for criticism of Hick’s theory

Hick’s theory has been recognized as one of the classic theories after Kant, (Yadlapati, 2011, 1) and many theologians have used it as a base to develop further theories, yet this theory has found many adversaries. The theory revolves around many common ideas which majority of religions subscribe, such as belief in a higher reality, religions as responses in knowing the ‘ineffable ultimate reality’, ethical principles and values, as an expression of faith and finally significance of the practice of spiritual tradition to realize the ultimate reality. Ironically, these very propositions also serve as criticisms against his theory. Overall, Hick’s theory is charged with three major and two minor criticisms. The paper shall further dwell on three of the central

criticisms that challenge Hick. They are; (1) Conflicting truth claims, (2) Common Soteriological goals and , (3) Theistic agnosticism. Let us begin with the first criticism which is the issue of conflicting truth claims.

Conflicting truth claims

Each religion stems from its founding element, culture, and context where it evolves and flourishes, a tradition that it sets forth to be followed by its adherents and within that tradition and its founding element builds a vision of the divine. This vision is the core that each adherent need to ultimately realize. However, religions across the world believe in contrasting theories that define their ultimate. For eg; A Christian believes in Jesus Christ as the Lord incarnated through the human form, whereas the Muslims believe Jesus Christ as the chosen messenger sent by God and refuse to accept him as the incarnation of God, while ‘Theravada Buddhists’ do not believe in an ontological creator at all. (Netland, 1986, 250). It is thus observed that religions support claims that conflict with each other. The question that one is led to is that either one of the truth claims by some religion has to be false, especially conflicting claims both cannot be true. For example; Jesus Christ is the God incarnate as opposed to being the messenger of God. One of the claims is to be assumed as false. This is not a comfortable position for adherents of either one of the truth claims.

When there are contradicting truth claims, questioning of the truth value of the fundamental beliefs of the religion cannot be avoided. Hick acknowledges by advocating the avoidance of the exclusive attitude which encourages a ‘polemic view’ of religion. Contrarily, he suggests a “Copernican revolution in theology” which recognizes God as ‘*an sich*’ which is as it is in itself (David C, n.d.) or ‘the real’ to be at the centre and all other religions to revolve around him. According to him, all religions are varied conceptions of the divine and in their varied traditions, reflections of his divine reality. In other words, according to Hick, “the major

religious traditions represent culturally conditioned responses to the one divine reality” (Netland 1986, 252).

Netland supports Hick suggesting some philosophers views that religious discourse is not only to be understood in terms of ‘prepositions’, or “factually informative statements with true value”, rather they have to be understood as “distinctive mode of discourse which expresses one’s attitude towards life and the world or which motivates us towards a desired form of behavior” (Ibid). Hick too contends that when contradictory statements are expressed, it is not appropriate to judge the truth or falsity of the claim, rather treat each preposition as a response or an expression of alternate attitude to reality of the ultimate. He explains it as “the differences seen in ways of conceiving and experiencing and hence also responding to the divine reality” Hick in Netland (251, 1986). Thus, it is evident that Hick does not claim affirmation towards a single truth claim but offers a hypothesis which would bind various religions together towards an ultimate reality some major religions adhere towards. He also offers a proposition where closeness to the divine reality gives rise to positive desired behavior which is also the motive of religions. Panikkar has refuted Hick on basis of his claim to objectivity, however, Hick defended his proposal stating that his theory is a hypothesis in understanding ‘the real’ and should not be taken as “access to religious truths” (Yadlapati, 2011, 7). This view certainly allows insight into the positives the theory proposes. It is allowing various faiths to perceive a shared objective even if their narration differs.

The ultimate as a personal or impersonal object:

Religions differ in their definition of God. Some faith having messiah have defined God in human terms as manifestations of the divine example; Christianity. Whereas some religions refrain from assigning any form to the ultimate. Known even as the ‘sacred’, religion like Islam finds it sacrilege to even allow an individual or object to be equated with the ‘most high’ termed as ‘Allah’. Thus questions arise in terms of conceiving the divine as personal as opposed to

impersonal which again is perceived to conflict by their nature of the object- the ultimate. Hick suggests that ontological claims do not concern themselves to the derivation of truth or falsity but are to be appreciated for their “functional and linguistic tools which are efficacious in achieving the soteriological goals of ‘transformation of human existence from Self centredness to Reality – centeredness’”. Hick refers to beliefs or doctrines as ‘images’ or ‘conceptions of the divine’, ‘visions of the reality’, linguistic pictures’ or ‘maps of the universe’(Netland, 1986 p.). Hick furthers that “in relation to God the mode of the knower differs among the religious cultures of the earth.” Ruston (2015, 17) gives reference of The Bible (S.T., II/II. Q.1, art 2) where God in the words of Thomas Aquinas, is known “in the knower according to the mode of the knower” According to him, this approach to God is congruent to Hick’s theory of pluralism. In one of his archive collections, Hick writes about the religious experience as not a separate way of knowing, but that, it helps an individual make meaning and ‘build a total interpretation of his world’. (Ruston, 2015, 11) A fair defense is advocated. In these terms, God can be recognized through the eyes of the perceiver. The paper will further unpack the next criticism levied which is the understanding of a common goal of salvation among religions.

Common Soteriological goal:

A corresponding challenge is exposed to Hick’s comments on soteriology. Most world traditions gravitate towards the motif of ‘salvation’. Hick minimized the differences in their understanding of salvation by espousing a ‘common soteriological goal’ which constitutes salvation. (Netland, 1986, 256)

Deliberating on the concept of the salvation of major religions, Hick suggests,

“They do, however, in fact, I suggest, exhibit a common structure, which is soteriological in the broad sense that it offers a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly

better one. They each speak in their different ways of the wrong or distorted or deluded character of the present human existence in its unchanged condition. ... In each case, salvation/liberation consists in a new and limitlessly better quality of existence which comes about in the transition from self- centeredness to Reality- centeredness". (Netland, 1986, 256)

According to Hick moving from being human-like with all its deformities and limitations to coming close to the real and becoming God-like was among the understanding of salvation. However, this clause has met many opponents. Chief among them are, Netland, Panikkar, and Lee. Netland questions Hick on the difference between reality-centeredness and morally acceptable behavior. According to Netland (1986, 257), Hick seems to have adopted the lowest common denominator' soteriology. Thus, his theory is critiqued to have a 'reductionist attitude'. As Hick's interpretation of the divine does not completely "resemble" to the belief of the respective religious traditions, Netland assigns his theory under the 'general theory of nature of religious traditions'. (1986, 253)

Panikkar and Heim both refute Hick's pluralism theory. Panikkar in Yadlapati (2011, 2- 3) contends on three grounds, they are; "a claim to objectivity, a reduction of actual difference, and marginalization of religious perspectives" The first is assuming common goal for all religions suggest dismissing the subjectivity or particularism of individual religions. By marginalization of particular religious outlooks, Hicks is, in turn, eroding the objectives of pluralism which is encouraging mutual understanding, peace, and cooperation. Religious adherents converse among each other based on their religious particulars which cannot happen if religious particulars are undermined. Also, by claiming common goal Hick is also claiming a 'meta-perspective' which is able to see beyond the marginal perspectives of individual religions, is at a higher position from where truth claims can be judged and are even able to decide the true goal for each of the religion. Panikkar is supported by Heim in repudiating Hick's theory. According to Heim too Hick's theory becomes ineffective in addressing

postmodern concerns and resolving differences among cultures. By proclaiming a single common goal, Hick's theory compromised on the unique and particularity of individual faith traditions which was then subjected to only "superficial flavors" of religious traditions. Further, Heim contends that Hick's meta-perspective claimed superiority, a higher objective over all other perspectives which led to its failure in its attempt to bring religions closer to each other. (Ibid 2-3)

Lee, (1998, 455) attributes reductionism due to an oversight or insight of Hick's analogy which does not give credit to religious traditions which belief in nonpersonal divine reality. Zen monks reject dualism and perceive enlightenment or satori as direct unmediated apprehension of the ultimate nature of reality which transcends all distinctions. This state can according to them can be achieved only through rigorous self-discipline. Lee refers to it as 'Descriptive' and 'Explanatory reductionism'. A descriptive reductionism occurs when a subject identifies an emotion, practice or experience in religious terms but the experience is misidentified or assigned to another different experience completely. Whereas, an Explanatory reduction arises when the subject itself disapproves of explanation assigned to the experience. Hick's understanding of salvation is hinged on a form of change or a higher reality "to be grasped" which suggested an "impermanence, determinative, constituent factor of all phenomenon" Hick in Lee, (1998, 457), but as Thomas Kasulis in Lee explains, " it is futile to seek a permanently unchanging object, whether it be God, soul, atman, or an essence that distinguishes one from everybody else... In other words, when projecting our experience of change onto some external noumenon, we falsely assume the experiencing self to be unchanging, but when we take the experience of change as it is and make no projections beyond what is directly given, there is simply the unending experience of flux" (1998, 457). Thus, particularly for Zen Buddhist, Hick's metaphysical ultimate ground does not yield as phenomenal experience as the overall experience of noumenon does not admit real contact with

a higher reality. Thus based on the above three criticisms, it is evident that Hick's theory is not effective in convincing its defendants and is unable to respond to the deliberations put forth. Finally, Hick has also been accused of agnosticism which is rationalized further in the paper.

Theological Agnosticism:

Hick is accused of 'theological agnosticism' by Netland and Lee. Netland challenges him on two claims. First, incompatible elements denoting similar reality, and secondly, insufficient understanding of the divine, whereas Lee finds the theory unacceptable to the notion of Soto Zen Buddhism.

Incompatible Elements Denoting Similar Reality:

In his Hick theory, Hick mentions the 'ineffable ultimate reality' to be realized through multiple ways devised by the various religions. Netland (1986, 258) quotes Hick, that, in his understanding and explanation of the divine, the element of continuity between the divine one and the phenomena or the *persona* is that the phenomenon is the manifestations of the eternal or the divine. The examples quoted by Hick are, the Yahweh, Allah, Buddha or even the concept of Sunyata or nothingness which Hick describes as an experience of the eternal ones described by the divine manifested figures. Thus, for Hick, 'salvation' can be perceived and experienced as both personal figures as well as non-personal experiences. He suggests these all be the characteristics and perceptions of worldview realized by the various religions. However, his theory denotes incompatible elements, different referents to denote the same ultimate reality. The question asked is, how is nothingness equivalent to Allah? How can Personal, creator/sustainer, righteous judge, be equal to nothingness? These inconsistencies have not received many resolutions from Hick.

Insufficient understanding of the Divine:

Netland also critiques Hick's theory as it assumes the existence of the divine reality but does not give a clear picture of the nature of its independent existence. Hick uses the hypothesis of Immanuel Kant of distinguishing the "single divine noumenon, the eternal in itself transcending the scope of human thought and language as opposed to the phenomenal world which is the noumenal world as humanly experienced"... "it is divine noumenon which is experienced and thought within different traditions as the range of divine phenomena by the religious history of mankind" Kant in Netland, (1986, 254). Hick's theory acknowledges the existence of the divine from Kant's philosophy, however, as different religions propound their belief in their own linguistic and theological understanding, he accounts for different faiths to being responses according to their cultural influences, but not any single faith is recognized to provide a sufficient understanding or an independent understanding of the divine.

Unacceptable to Soto Zen Buddhism:

The Third contention is levied by Lee, (1998, 453) who points out some major challenges in this ideology when it is connected to Soto Zen Buddhism. Representation of Zen Buddhism is through a Zen master Dogen. According to Dogen, the theory fails to attract acceptance on two major and one minor point. First, Soto Zen does not believe in a metaphysical reality above the phenomenal, but rather its a "transcendental or immanent throughgoing acceptance and appreciation of the phenomenal". Secondly, the Zennist, need to be stripped of their "conceptual, linguistic fetters" to then qualify to gain an awareness of the "true" nature of reality. And finally, Zennist believes in a compassionate edge as a necessitating factor to experience the divine reality. The final argument can be seen as a connection to Hick's theory, however, then it is incoherent with the first two points. Overall, it seems to be ineffective in its objectives of connecting major religions together as it does not address the specific issues of these religions.

Hick was a born Christian and propagated Christianity in his early years. However as he moved away from exclusivism to pluralism, his critics arose from both the troops. First, the exclusivist disapproved of his theory and next, ironically, his theory on pluralism was labeled as another form of exclusivism!

Unacceptable to Exclusive Christians:

In terms of religions adhering to the divine form or 'personae' is also met with disapproval through a detailed analysis of scripture by Pannenberg. Pannenberg espouses that Christianity does not believe God to be a transcendent reality to be realized and responded to in different ways. Rather, it believes in the claim made by Jesus (LK11:20) that "transcendent God is present in Jesus' activity" and an appropriate response can only be faith in Jesus. The criticism is through the exclusivist Christians who believe in the specific truth claims about Christ and incarnation which specifically quoted that there will be no salvation outside of Christianity. For Pannenberg, submitting to Hick's ideology is a possibility provided the adherents are not implored to give up their own specific truth claim. But believing in Hick's form of pluralism, the adherents could not have to give up their exclusive truth claims. (Pannenberg. Year.p 98). However, Hick acknowledges this fact and encourages them to become inclusive Christians.

Pluralism a form of Exclusivism:

Though the idea of pluralism is most actively advocated by Hick, one of the accusations levied by D'Costa on his theory is that pluralism too is another form of exclusivism (1996, p. 228). Hick's theory propounds the truth claim that God is all-loving and desires salvation for all people and ultimately this is achieved by an eternal loving fellowship. But, the religions which do not subscribe to this ideology are considered 'false and provisional'. D'Costa raises this point that though Hick has always been dedicated to upholding the "cognitive status of religious language", it disregards the conflicting views contesting this pluralist ideology. Thus this suggests that the theory is exclusive in some particular areas of its truth claims which are similar

to adhering to exclusivism in some regard. Thus he states that “pluralism to is a logical form of exclusivism and nothing called pluralism exists”(D’Costa, 1996, 225). D’costa furthers his charge to ‘transcendental agnosticism which means that Hick’s theory asserts very specific truth claims that are exclusive truth claims (1996, 229). D’Costa points out that religions that do not assert the same are deemed as mythical. Thus according to his, this too administers an intolerant exclusive position for his theory.

Conclusion:

This essay explicates and assesses John Hick’s theory on grounds of effectivity through the consistency of its claims. The theory had set out to achieve pluralistic objectives that would support in connecting faith communities based on the common elements in each community's beliefs. These included; belief in God, the belief in ethical values its practice as an expression of faith, practicing tradition related institutional forms of faith which lead us close to realizing the “ineffable ultimate reality” and finally, imbibing a pluralist attitude towards other faiths which should be perceived of equal significance as one’s own. However, the theory has received more adversaries and criticisms than defenders. The essay analyzed the three major and two minor forms criticisms based on the inconsistencies pointed out by the academic community. It was assessed that Hick’s theory is effective if perceived as a hypothesis for point one which is conflicting truth claims. It can also be affirmed as a ‘general ideology of nature of religious traditions’ as validated by Netland. It is significant to acknowledge that after Kant, it is regarded as one of the classic theories to have proposed religious pluralism. However, it proved to be ineffective when challenged on grounds of proposing a common soteriological goal and a ‘theological agnosticism’. On counts of minor criticisms, the theory did not find many supporters to defend itself from the condemnation being in disharmony with exclusivist and was rather labeled as just another form of exclusivism.

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