Expound and Assess John Hick's Thesis of Religious Pluralism

Assessment 3

Methods and Approaches in Interfaith Studies (HPPD7001)

Submitted by

Hsueh-Ying Hsu (also known as Wu Ping)
Student Number: 1707645

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Introduction

'The lamps are different, but the Light is the same' quoted from thirteen century great Sufi Master Jalalu'l-Din Rumi described the religious pluralistic idea of John Hick (Hick 1989, 233).

Professor John Hick (1922-2012), born in Scarborough, England, was probably the 20th century's most influential philosopher of religion and theology. Professor Hick used to be a fundamentalist evangelical Christian. He was confused with the exclusive interpretation of Christian theology for other religions for many years. He pondered the correctness of the thinking that if Christianity is the only truth, then the other religions are false. Until he moved to Birmingham, England in 1967 and gave teachings on philosophy at the University of Birmingham, he experienced religious diversity. At that time there were a large number of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindu communities as well as a Jewish community in Birmingham. When Hick met these people of different religions and occasionally attended their worships in the mosque, gurdwara, temple and synagogue their places of worship (mosque, gurdwara, temple or synagogue), his thoughts began to change (Johnson). Hick's experiences in Birmingham were essential in helping him build his pluralist theology. Later he visited India and Sri Lanka to study Hinduism and Buddhism. Gradually he became a religious pluralist. To those non-Christian friends, Hick said in his book *God Has Many Names*,

'it was evident that essentially the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church--namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man' (Hick 1982, 5).

In this essay, I am going to expound John Hick's thesis of 'religious pluralism' covers the four points: (1) People are inherently religious because of their religious experience; (2) There is enormous diversity in religious beliefs and practice in Ambiguous world; (3) All religions are paths leading to the Ultimate Reality, or the Real; (4) the primary goal of each of the major religions in their different ways is "the transformation of people from self-centredness to Reality-centeredness". The assessment of his pluralism will include the views of different people such as Keith Ward, S. Mark Heim, Alistair McGrath, and Adnan Aslan as

well as I will assess from a Buddhist perspective. I then summarize his view for pluralism.

Pluralistic Hypothesis

John Hick disagreed with the exclusivist idea that only Christianity can lead to salvation. He also disagreed with the inclusive idea that considered non-Christians as anonymous Christians, which is an uncomfortable imperialistic-sounding phrase.

In order to implement the pluralistic claims, Hick named the highest divine level in religion, which the ultimate goal that religious adherents want to achieve, as the 'Real' or called 'the Ultimate Reality' or the Transcendental. The central point of Hick's pluralist thesis is the idea that there is only one ultimate divine reality. The purpose of each religion is to help all people transform from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. Every religion helps people to become a better person, morally and ethically. However, Hick believed that the doctrines and dogmas of various religions that do not conform to the common moral ideals should be purified from the religion by their followers.

According to Hick's idea that for God's great love will not seclude His salvation in Christian only yet neglect the majority of non-Christians. Therefore, there is salvation in non-Christian faiths.

The central concern to each of the great world faiths is to teach us to transcend the concept of ego, which is the root of greed, cruelty, selfishness, exploitation, injustice, and to become re-centred in that ultimate Reality. , In Christianity, they use the term God; in Islam, they use the term Allah; in Buddhism, the term the Dharmakaya or Buddhahood; and in Judaism, the term Jehweh. Hick proposed to use the terms Ultimate Reality or the Transcendent or the Real. He reasoned that because that in the Christian language it is customary to use the term God to believe that God is the ultimate truth and that the word also corresponds to the Sanscrit sat and Arabic al-Haqq and has similarities in other languages (Hick 1995, 17).

Hick asserts that religious experience is something that people have reason to believe. People are religious because they have experienced the sacredness or the divinity. However, Hick realized that the world is ambiguous. Our daily experiences can be explained in religious or non-religious ways. One person may recognize his or her own personal experience as religious while the others do not feel the same way for their experiences. In addition, religious experiences

can be explained by Christianity, but they can also be explained by Islam or Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, and other traditions. Hick used the ambiguous notion to explain religious or non-religious and theistic or atheistic ways of the world. The world is sufficiently vague to allow religious interpretation of the world in different ways, and there is equality between the major religions of the world in terms of their salvific and moral effects.

Rationalizing religious beliefs on the basis of religious experience and the notion of an ambiguous world made Hick moved to pluralism because this thesis applies to all religious traditions. As far as human observation is concerned, Hick found that no religion can reasonably “prove” its claim about God and all religions involve sacred or divine experience. He also observed that no religion is higher than other religions in the ability of transformation of lives; also, no religion can claim to be the only religious tradition having the true religious experience. Hick asserted that if there is no religion that can prove their claim, if the experience is the reason for providing faith, then all religions must be respected and taken seriously.

The traditional Christian claims have faced the challenge of the resemblance between different religions. Hick said that if the traditional Christian theology is true, then Christianity should produce better people. But it cannot be proved as Hick said in the Rainbow of Faiths,

‘One cannot, of course, say that any randomly chosen Christian should be expected to be morally and spiritually superior to any randomly chosen non-Christian. That would be an unreasonable demand’ (Hick 1995, 16).

In general, according to Hick, great world religious traditions such as Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and other traditional beliefs have been existing for many centuries and have affected huge millions of people in a positive way. Hick explained his observation that ‘there is a deep devotion to God, true sainthood, and deep spiritual life within these other religions’ (McGrath 2017, 423).

To have a better interpretation of his pluralist hypothesis, Hick explained the religious pluralism by applying Immanuel Kant's philosophy of epistemology and Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of cognition.

In the process of human epistemology, people experience things through continuous observation, cognition, selection, classification, and reasoning. Kant distinguished between noumena (*an sich*) and phenomena; the former refers to

a thing in itself or things as they are, while the latter indicates what we experience or things seem to us and as they appear to be.

We understand the world through our perception. We experience diverse "phenomena" through what things seem to us. The noumena implicating things in their pure form is unknowable and super-categorical and it is not what we can directly experience. However, the phenomenal world of our experience is generated by the interpretation our mind via our sense to the input from the noumenal source—the Reality. It is the mind that actively shaping our perception. Kant himself did not apply his cognitive model to religion for his idea God is postulated, but Hick thought it also applied to the religious analysis.

The Reality *an sich* is postulated by us as a pre-supposition of our religious experience and religious life. According to Hick, he thought that distinguishing between phenomena and noumena would allow us to understand that all religions are talking about the same reality, even though they may perform it in different ways. If we experience things completely according to what the things really are, then this phenomenon will be the same as the noumenon. In other words, what the thing seems to us is the same as the thing really is. Why we do not perceive this because our thinking will influence the way we experience things. We are not experiencing the world in a middle way or in the purity of mind, but through the views of our own experiences.

As Hick said that the existence of the noumenal world has nothing to do with our view of it, and the phenomenal world is the same world that exists in our human consciousness. The noumenal reality is contemplated and experienced by different human minds, forming and established by different religious traditions, such as the scope of the gods and the absolutes which are the reports of religious phenomenology, the phenomenal manifestations of the Reality (Hick 1989, 241-242).

Another important source of Hick's religious pluralism epistemology is the concept of "seeing-as" applied the thoughts of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He believed that Wittgenstein's thought is "constructive" to religious philosophy. Wittgenstein uses the psychologist Jastrow's ambiguous ‘duck-rabbit’ (a duck head that faces the left or a rabbit that faces the right) picture in his discussion of seeing -as. The mixed pattern of the head is stated as a theory. Hick’s interpretation of the theory is as follows: Suppose there are two groups of people in different cultural contexts, group one is familiar with the duck in their life, but has never seen or even heard of the rabbit; the other group is just the opposite, they know the rabbit, but know nothing about the duck. When the

people of group one looked at the mixed pattern, due to the lack of knowledge about the rabbit, the pattern was taken for granted as a duck head and they are not aware of other possibilities. On the other hand, the people of other group are bound to regard the pattern as a rabbit head. Both of them are correct. Therefore, the two quite different ways, as a duck or a rabbit, can be equally correct. Through this, Hick believed that the ineffable ultimate reality can be a real experience in different sets of human concepts, such as the personae: Jehweh, Allah, Shiva, and Vishnu, or the impersonal: the Holy Trinity, the Dharmakaya, Tao, and Brahman. These different concepts in the personal or non-personal description are the connections of the common boundary between the Ultimate Reality and our different religious mindsets and cultures (Hick 1995, 24-25).

Based on the above understanding, Hick believes that theology needs to get rid of the theological methods of Christian centralism. He claimed that we need to carry out the Copernican revolution in religious studies. Like the Copernican revolution in cosmology, the theological revolution is also driven by observations of the world, which is inconsistent with the way of seeing things by the traditional Christocentric theology. Hick listed several reasons to support the Copernican theological revolution.

1. It is empirical evidence that non-Christian religions produce saints with similar moral teachings and involve mystical experiences similar to Christianity. Christianity does not seem to produce "better" people than non-Christian religions. Non-Christian major religions have undergone the challenges for many centuries and many people have been benefitted from these religions. The similarities between different religious traditions can explain that religions all come from the same source of Ultimate Reality.

2. Observing on philosophical reason, we can never exactly know what God really is, hence, we cannot know or judge which religion is the most valid. We cannot test our beliefs and experiences independently. Therefore, we have no reason to believe that any religion is superior to another religion. Hick rejected the idea that Jesus was God incarnate. He considered the mythological characters developed by the early church, such as the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and others should be removed. Because he regarded the idea of a being who was both divinity and human existence was philosophically incoherent. In this way, it was possible to rediscover the true face of Jesus and what exactly he taught.

3. Based on the thoughtful considerations, Christocentric attitudes to non-Christian religions may encourage arrogance and offense to non-Christian believers. This may happen even with good intention, for example, the idea of an anonymous Christian. The purpose of the Copernican revolution is wishing to promote greater equality and tolerance within our society.

4. Hick observed that the religious views people uphold were usually from the opportunity where they were born in. For example, a person who is born in Israel will probably become a Jewish. It is not the case that people born in certain parts of the world get the truth, while people born in other areas do not. He further argues that people naturally think that their religious traditions are correct (philosopherkings.co.uk).

Hick saw ‘the great world faiths as very different but (so far as we can tell) equally valid ways of conceiving, experiencing, and responding in life to the ultimate reality that we call God. The rainbow, as the sun’s light refracted by the earth’s atmosphere into a glorious spectrum of colours, is a metaphor for the refraction of the divine Light by our human religious cultures’ (Hick 1995, x).

Assessment

Professor John Hick is such an innovative philosopher. But his proposals are not fitting into traditional orthodoxy of conservative Christianity nor the philosophical naturalism. His work brought great influence to many people but also receive immense of criticism. In his autobiography, Hick said that he received negative critiques from different places and these criticisms attacked him as an anti-Christian, a too-narrow Christian, an atheist, a polytheist, and so on (Hick 2002, 321). Until now, his pluralistic hypothesis and its implications for Christian theology have received the harshest criticisms.

Hick’s theocentric proposal inevitably conflicts with the basic doctrine of Christianity, the doctrine of the incarnation. The concept of the Real, proposed by Hick, is very close to the God of the Bible. Whatever terminology he uses for the Ultimate Reality, theism becomes his assumed system. In his pluralistic hypothesis, it is clearly contradictory to the truth claims of different religious traditions

Many Christians with conservative traditional thinking challenge Hick's interpretation of Christianity. They argue that he undermines the nature of religion and simplifies the Bible into a series of fictional stories with some good virtues and morals. Most Christians believe that the incarnation is the central

doctrine of Christianity. Like the Nicene Creed says, ‘We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God’. The earliest gospel Mark says, ‘The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God’ (Mark 1:1). Christians try to find more evidence to defend the core tenet about Jesus.

Through the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth’s emphasizing the central position of Jesus as God's self-revelation and Henrick Kraemer's argument for the most truthful interpretation of the Bible, Christian defenders will almost certainly regard Hick's description of the entirely human Jesus as harmful to Christianity. Many Christians believe the Incarnation and the resurrection and argue that this is why we need faith.

Many of these criticisms are mainly theological, but there are also some substantive philosophical criticisms. For example, Alvin Plantinga and Keith Yandell, Plantinga and Yandell each argue that if the Ultimate Reality is actually indescribable, then it could not serve as an interpretation for religious experience. If it is beyond distinguishing between good and evil, why believe moral development rather than moral degradation (Mackay 2016, 91)? The following is some other philosophical challenges to Hick.

Keith Ward regards Hick's thesis as 'hard pluralism', saying that it is incoherent, invalid, and philosophically unacceptable. Hick’s claims that all religious traditions are equally authentic ways to salvation and equally valid forms of experience of the Ultimate Reality (the Real), which is entirely unknowable. This is incoherent because if the Real is totally unknowable, then it is impossible to know that whether all religious experiences of the Real are equally true nor all paths to the Real are equally effective. Instead, Ward suggests a “soft pluralism” (Ward, ‘The Diversity of Truth and Religion’ 1991).

S. Mark Heim carefully analyzes the writings of John Hick. He found the essential weakness in Hick’s Pluralist argument is his insisting that various religions aim to the same final goal, the “Ultimate Reality” which is the same salvation. This point does not meet the criterion of plurality. For Heim, each religion has its unique salvation, so multiple faiths with multiple ways of salvation. It is valid that each religion considers its salvation is the best one. Heim considers Hick’s pluralism is insufficiently pluralistic while his propose is more pluralistic that provides multiple salvations (Heim 1995).

Alistair McGrath criticizes Hick’s moving away from the Christocentric approach. He argues that all religions have their own interpretations and understanding about God, which have no contradictions to one another but instead can serve

as complements to one another. He further asserts that for many Christians, Christ is the central message of Christianity. Christians meet God only through the revelation that occurring in Jesus Christ. Therefore the Christocentric approach cannot be removed. For many people, the turning away from Christ is the separation of what Christianity supposes to be and that of the Christian views (McGrath 1993, 460–462). McGrath considers Hick deconstructs the particularity of Christianity, but insists on retaining some frameworks, which is meaningless without fundamental Christian beliefs.

A Muslim critic Adnan Aslan, though inspired by John Hick's pluralist theology, questions/questioned the concept of the Ultimate Reality and the notion of sacred knowledge. He compared Hick's thought with the Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr's perennial philosophy. He argued that the Real, the Truth is not obtained by science and reason but by the 'intellect (mystical vision) which plays a significant part of in one's perception of Reality' (Aslan 1998, xiii). Hick's theoretical paradigms cannot be smoothly translated into religious reality. According to Hick, if 'the Ultimate Reality' is ineffable, then it cannot deliberately show itself to human beings. Therefore, the revelation is in the hearts of those who accept and experience it rather than God bestowed. This undermines the traditional Islamic views recorded in the Qur'an, which is the Word of God, as well as the traditional Christian views written in the Bible. Hick's theoretical pluralism cannot be smoothly interpreted into religious reality. Aslam provides a concrete example of how and why Hick's pluralism would be unacceptable to many non-Christian believers.

Keith E. Johnson argues in his paper titled 'John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis and the Problem of Conflicting Truth-Claims' that Hick's hypothesis does not provide adequate solutions to the problematic contradictions on the truthful claims of various religions.

Hick has responded to many criticisms in his books such as *An Interpretation of Religion, Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion, The Rainbow of Faith.* He also responds to critics with the articles such as the one where Hick argues that Meeker is mistaken in two crucial respects in 'Exclusivism versus pluralism in religion: a response to Kevin Meeker' (Hick 2006). He debates Gavin d'Costa's argument that 'pluralism must always logically be a form of exclusivism and that nothing called pluralism really exists' in 'The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin d'Costa' (Hick 1997).

In Buddhist perspective

According to Hick, the Real is unknowable, but in Buddhism, the Real is achievable and can be realized. The ultimate goal for Buddhism is to understand the reality of the life and the universe; in other words, to understand the true reality or what Hick called the Real. From the Buddha Gautama until now, including the Buddha himself, there were many great Buddhist masters and practitioners who had obtained enlightenment. They attained the realization to know the ultimate reality, the inconceivable and ineffable Reality. Therefore, the Real in the Buddhist perspective is attainable and knowable. To achieve enlightenment, a Buddhist practitioner needs to practice the Threefold Learning, namely moral self-discipline, meditative concentration, and innate wisdom. It is through the intuitive wisdom, which is free from ego, self-attachment, discrimination, and any wandering thoughts, that one can obtain enlightenment to know all. It is not achieved by reason or science or experience. It is the process of spiritual purity, not just letting go of ego or self-centredness which is just the initial requirement. Hick only mentioned removing self-centredness, which is too simple and vague. The procedures of cultivation are more detailed and specific. Practitioners who attained enlightenment and realize and witness the Reality can be classified into forty-two different levels in Buddhism. So this is not simply the Real issue.

Moreover, in the Buddhist perspective, a person who is born in some place is not based on deliberate luck (according to Hick's proposal) but is determined by their previous deeds in accordance with the law of cause and effect. Also, religions are beyond secular reason and experience cannot be judged by modern science and reason. Religion is above human imagination. Almost no one has sufficient and qualified wisdom to decide which mythological characters should be removed. Hick's removing Incarnation needs more consideration and evidence. It is presumed that there is only one Truth that can be described as the Ultimate Reality or the Real. If the Real is the final goal for every religion, then all religions are paths leading to the Ultimate Reality, proposed by Hick, is true. But there is still a need to provide evidence by finding out what exactly the Ultimate Reality is from the interpretation of each religion.

Though Hick's work has been challenged with some of the most serious criticisms from more conservative orthodox Christians, he also laid a great influence on this group of people. Many critics have turned to support his ideas after receiving his further interpretation or response. Many of Hick's students, including William Lane Craig, Steven T. Davis, and Harold A. Netland, are now distinguished Christian philosophers of their own. In addition, William Alston, his contemporary with more orthodox belief, has praised Hick's *Faith and*

Knowledge as an important influence on his extensively influential epistemology through religious experience. However, Hick's most indestructible influence was not in achieving individual scholars or establishing schools of thought but in the fruitful results of his efforts to restore the religious philosophy as an academically viable field during the time when it was on the verge of death (Cramer, 'John Hick (1922—2012)').

Conclusion

Professor John Hick has offered a good structure for pluralism. His pluralistic hypothesis that all religions are paths leading to the Ultimate Reality and their purpose to help people transform from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is very positive. He applied Kant's philosophy to shape his pluralistic theory. According to Hick's analysis, people have no direct experience and knowledge of "the Real", thus religions are human perception to "the Real," and are diversified by the historical and cultural backgrounds in which the religions developed. This explained why there are different religious traditions in the world. However, his demythologized claims have invited many criticisms. Throughout Hick's life, he tried to find the answers for the salvation and for a better human world. As D'Costa points out, throughout Hick's life, his 'theological pilgrimage moved "from Christocentrism to theocentrism to a Realocentrism' (D'Costa 1991, 5). These three stages portray Hick's individual as well as theological journey. His thoughts have influenced many people. He wished that people can transform from a self-centred exclusivist mind to impartial-open pluralistic mind. As he said, 'Why does all this matter? We only have to look at the state of the world to see why. The Catholic theologian Hans Kung has said that there will never be peace between the nations until there is peace between the religions. And I would add that there will never be genuine peace between the religions until each comes to recognise the equal validity of the others. Let us all do in our time what we can to bring this about' (Hick 2006). John Hick's pluralism may not be perfect, but his idea really inspire many people, and will be going to inspire more people.

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