

# Postmodernism, pluralism and John Hick

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Whether the movement known as postmodernism proves to be a major cultural shift or merely a hiatus in the progress of modernism will not be evident for some time, but its present influence is undeniable. Prophets vehemently proclaim the demise of the worn-out Enlightenment project with its uncritical faith in the omniscience of reason and the ability of science both to describe accurately the way the world is, and also to manipulate it to conform to man's needs. Wedded with industrialization and technological advance, the legacy of the Age of Reason is seen to be obsession with the cash-nexus, with forecasting, planning, managing and controlling. It is alleged that modernism is arrogant, manipulative and imperialistic in its exploitation both of the world's limited resources and of those vulnerable cultures which cannot keep up with the march of 'civilization'. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century optimism is perceived to have given way to bewildered ideological exhaustion in the wake of the demise of Communism, impending ecological disaster, the rank profusion of urban jungles and the threat of international anarchy. The very universe itself seems to have responded to secular man's attempt to 'disenchant the world', to use Weber's memorable phrase, by wrapping itself again in a cloak of inscrutability. The central discoveries of science and mathematics in this century seem to have a sobering resonance way beyond their particular disciplines: relativity (Einstein), uncertainty (Heisenberg), incompleteness (Gödel), unpredictability (chaos theory).

In response to cultural awe-deprivation, postmodernism stresses man's finitude in an ultimately mysterious universe. All attempts at objective and comprehensive descriptions of the way the world is are interpreted as but an expression of unwarranted *hubris*. All theories which claim universal applicability and all religions which demand the allegiance of the whole human family are dismissed as spurious because they fall into the discredited class of 'meta-narratives'. Instead we should bask in the welter of different and contradictory cultural voices. We should work towards Foucault's *heterotopia*, dipping eclectically into whatever we find pleasant or useful for the present moment. Since objective truth is beyond our grasp, we must pragmatically follow whatever ideas we find useful and conducive. It will be evident to the discerning reader that the pick-'n-mix philosophy of the New Age movement is just one example of this wider cultural movement. To convey something of the crusading spirit of postmodernism, let me quote T. Eagleton:

Post-modernism signals the death of such 'metanarratives' whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a 'universal' human history. We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish for the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern. . . . Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.<sup>1</sup>

A.S. Ahmed also expresses well the postmodernist mindset which 'must look for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning; avoid choices between black and white, "either-or" and accept "both-and"; evoke many levels of meaning and combinations of focus; and accept self-discovery through self-knowledge.'<sup>2</sup>

But what is the relevance of all this for the student of theology? Just that it constitutes the *Zeitgeist* behind some of the most influential works of contemporary Western theology. This claim could easily be substantiated by an analysis of the recent

work of Don Cupitt, for example, but in this article I wish to concentrate on John Hick's recent and justly acclaimed volume, *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), which is laid back in tone (Hick is a universalist), recommends a pragmatic test for the evaluation of the world's religions and dismisses, without using the term, all meta-narratives in the face of an inscrutable universe and an ineffable divinity. Hick's earlier 'Copernican revolution' had replaced Christ as the centre of the religions with God at the centre and different saints and prophets (Christ included) orbiting, but in this recent volume he presents a modified picture which allows non-theists like Theravada Buddhists into the solar system. At the centre is now what he likes to call 'the Real', a neo-Kantian unknowable numinosity which may or may not be interpreted in theistic terms. Just as light is indescribable in itself but may manifest itself as waves or particles, so the Real may be apprehended as, say, personal by the Muslim or impersonal by the Transcendental Meditator.

Hick begins with a phenomenological study of the world's religions and notes that a major development occurred during what he calls (following Jaspers) 'the axial age' of the mid-first millennium BCE when religious concerns shifted from the maintenance of social well-being to the personal quest for self-transcendence and salvation beyond this world. Within a very short period variants of this doctrine were being taught by Zoroaster, Gautama Buddha, Lao Tzu, Mahavira and the authors of the *Upanishads*, not to mention Jewish prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Hick sees the essence of all their teachings to be what religion is all about, namely the good news that there is an escape from ignorance and suffering by the provision of a path which leads away from self-centred regard to Reality-centredness and sainthood.

But why believe that there is a Real at all? Hick continues by surveying the traditional theistic arguments and finds none of them cogent. For example, looking at the moral argument he develops a natural law position and concludes that human nature and the way people interact dictates how they should live together without the requirement of some divine moral decree. Rather than seeking evidence for God as one would an item in the world, Hick prefers another approach. All perception, he observes, involves interpretation, or 'seeing as'. The physical world is open to very little variation of interpretation, but most of us claim to discern a deeper level of reality which may be called the ethical, and here 'seeing as' differs fairly widely between cultures. At a yet more profound level reality may be discerned as sacred and this religious apprehension forms the basis of the welter of the religions of the world, each of which interpret their discovery in a somewhat different way. Hick is therefore sympathetic to A. Plantinga's view that religious belief is a form of basic knowledge.

All religions, then, are a response to the holy but their profound disagreement regarding the nature of that central reality (personal or impersonal? good or beyond moral categories? *etc.*) indicates, according to Hick, that no-one can experience the Real in an unmediated form. Both the human perceptual apparatus and cultural conceptual factors colour the way the Real is 'seen as'. Just as dreams are the product of the interaction of the outside world with our psyches, so even the mystic's experience of the Real is always mediated. How then can the Real be described in itself? Startlingly, Hick responds by insisting that nothing at all can correctly be said about it: 'Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. . . . We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity.'<sup>3</sup>

It follows that it is impossible to judge between religions according to their doctrinal accuracy. Instead, Hick offers the ethical criterion: does the religion work in terms of the production of saints? Does it produce individuals who are free from self-centredness and who are serene, charitable to others, pure and strong of soul? Using this test, Hick concludes that all of the major religions present a mixed picture and in the last analysis there is not much to choose between them. They are all approximately equal as effective paths to salvation.

Finally, Hick turns to an examination of the remaining disagreements between the religious systems: for example, do we have one life or are we reincarnated? did Jesus die on the cross or was he replaced by a substitute, as most Muslims contend? Hick dismisses these vestigial problems as not worth worrying about either because the truth is irrevocably lost in the mists of history or because the matter is immaterial to the process of salvation and inner transformation.

Having completed a brief, but I trust fair, exposition of Hick's present position on religious pluralism, I shall now subject it to a number of philosophical criticisms, to be followed by some final observations on postmodernism and theology.

1. Hick attempts to overcome the scandal of particularity by identifying the essence of post-axial religions as the quest for self-transcendence beyond this world, but is even this minimalist account comprehensive enough? Is he not perpetuating the scandal by excluding pre-axial religion which, of course, still thrives in many parts of the world as primal religion. And what of post-axial religions like Confucianism, which are primarily concerned with the affairs and relationships of this world? The fact is that the various religions cannot be reduced to a common core. They each have their own interests and agendas, their own diagnoses of the human predicament and proffered cures. To the basic human questions: where have I come from? what am I? where am I going? the religions will offer a welter of answers as they will to the fundamental query, what must I do to be saved? One has only to meet advanced practitioners of the different faiths to recognize that they are just not going in the same direction.

2. In attempting to accommodate all religions, Hick manages to alienate those he most wants to include, since it is axiomatic to, for example, Zen Buddhists and devotees of Advaita Hinduism that (notwithstanding Hick's claim to the contrary) ultimate reality *can* be experienced directly without mediation. (They would, however, thoroughly disagree concerning the nature of that reality — for Zen but emphatically not for Advaita, *samsara is nirvana*.) While Hick cheerfully tells them that he is on their side, they will curtly inform him that they are not on his! While telling them that they are right, they will tell him that he is wrong.

3. Hick slips into the logical fallacy of the quantifier-shift when he adduces references to an ineffable reality in the sacred texts of the world's religions and deduces from this that they must all be referring to the same object, namely the Real. It cannot be validly inferred from 'many people have seen an *x* (e.g. a tree)' to 'there is an *x* (e.g. a tree) which many people have seen'. The fallacy is more patent in the parallel, flawed argument that since I saw something out of my window that I didn't know the name for and you saw something on holiday that you didn't know the name for, we must have seen the same thing. Arguably there can be many different kinds and sources of ineffable experience. For instance, the 14th-century Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck reprimanded the monks in his charge for assuming their mystical quest was over because they had reached an ineffable state: he interpreted this as merely the soul having emptied itself of all thoughts and sense experience as a prelude to the possibility of a genuine religious experience — a gracious visitation of the ineffable God.<sup>5</sup>

4. If the Real is utterly ineffable in itself and beyond all qualities, as Hick claims, why assume that the religions are correct and the atheist is mistaken? If the featureless Real can manifest itself to the Hindu as *nirvana*, why not to the atheist as purposeless interacting particles? Why is one more right than the other? In fact, total ineffability entails total agnosticism. That which is conceptually empty is indistinguishable from nothing. All the great theologians have realized that the *via negativa* can only be used in conjunction with some positive statements about what God is: for example, Aquinas insisted that God was immutable (not subject to change) and eternal (not subject to time) but he also taught positively that God was creator of all things other than himself. Actually, it is far from clear that even the monotheistic religions are worshipping the same being, as some have claimed, using the

argument that since there is only one God, worship directed to God cannot help but find his address. P. Geach exposes the fallacy of this view by telling a little story:

An unscrupulous canvasser is securing the vote of a man for the candidate sponsored by the Prime Minister, at the relevant time Mr Harold Macmillan. The voter is in a state of senile confusion; he has hopelessly confounded Mr Macmillan with the labour hero Ramsay MacDonald of his own youth, and he associates the noun 'Unionist' not with the Conservative and Unionist Party, but with Trades Unions. Although at the relevant time there was only one Prime Minister, it would be quite unfair to count the old man as a supporter of the Prime Minister. Similarly, if a man has sufficiently misguided religious opinions he cannot count as a worshipper of the only true God.<sup>6</sup>

5. If God is beyond all categories, including good and evil (as Hick avers in his attempt at inclusivity), then in fact, certain religions like Advaita Hinduism are on the right track and Christianity, for example, is false in its truth claims. In fact, all truth claims are exclusive — to affirm something is to deny something else. This was a problem C.S. Lewis found with tolerant Hinduism and I am sure he would have been equally frustrated with the tolerant Hick. To Bede Griffiths, Lewis wrote in 1956, 'Your Hindus certainly sound delightful. But what do they *deny*? That has always been my trouble with Indians — to find any proposition they wd. [*sic*] pronounce false. But truth must surely involve exclusions'.<sup>7</sup> Hick attempts impartiality by seeking to place the Real beyond all truth claims, but by describing it as he does, he himself unwittingly makes truth claims by implicitly denying the specific truth claims of, say, Christianity that God is wholly good.

6. Applying this same insight, we must infer from Hick's insistence that the Real cannot be said to be purposive that religions which claim special revelation must be mistaken, yet this cuts at the heart of religions like Sikhism, Judaism and Islam. In his attempt to include all, he has managed to alienate most. Truth claims are exclusive — not everyone can be right.

7. If the Real cannot be said to be purposive, then grace must be denied, but if there is no help to be gained from the divine and if, as Hick claims, ethics is autonomous then surely religion becomes otiose. Why not become a humanist enamoured of religious symbolism, like Cupitt?

8. In fact, ethical convictions emerge from the notion of purpose, and so conclusions vary between worldviews. For example, answers to questions such as the following are far from clear given a merely human perspective: is a dolphin as valuable as a person? is a woman as valuable as a man? as an embryo? In a useful metaphor that goes back to C.S. Lewis, the moral code may be likened to orders sent to a fleet of ships. These orders will cover how to remain shipshape and avoid sinking (individual ethics), how to avoid bumping into each other (social ethics) and also, most importantly, how to carry out the purpose for which they were sent to sea. Ethics based on natural law can deal confidently with the first two, but has no answer to the third which requires information, that is revelation, from the One who designed and planned the universe.

9. If the Real is beyond good and evil, how can Hick consistently use the moral test to judge between putative saints from within the various traditions? An appropriate dispositional response depends on the nature of the Real. Surely a Real beyond moral categories could equally inspire a Nietzsche or a Crowley as a Nanak or a Christ?

10. It is insensitive to claim, as Hick does, that the remaining clear disagreements between religions are secondary and unimportant. For example, the question of whether Jesus was the unique incarnation of God remains central to Christians, Muslims and Hindus, all of whom hold their opposing positions on this issue with passionate concern. The issue is not a trifle. So much is at stake. As A. McGrath reminds us: 'Suppose Jesus Christ is *not* God, but just a man. Then the cross shows the love of one human being for others. It is human, not divine, love. The cross shows the love of God for us, because it is the Son of God that went to the cross for us'.<sup>8</sup>

11. In fact, Hick's pluralist thesis is viable only if the incarnation doctrine is false. But to relativize Jesus is to deny him. If Christians are right about their Lord, then he is Lord of everyone whatever their religion.

While attempting to be supremely tolerant and inclusive, Hick manages, then, to present a thesis which, if accepted, would have a devastating effect on Christian theology and practice. Not only would the doctrines of incarnation and atonement have to be discarded, but also the evangelization imperative, as well as other, less obvious aspects of the faith such as the belief in divine providence. And as for intercessory prayer — presumably we ought to follow Paul Tillich in dropping it in favour of meditation.

As was suggested in the introduction, Hick's work is a theological version of the postmodernist response to the crusading arrogance of the Enlightenment meta-narrative which was convinced that it was in the process of discovering an exact description of the world which it had a duty to export to all cultures. Thanks to the pioneering work of scholars like T.S. Kuhn, philosophers of science are now aware that we cannot hope to see the world as it is in itself: rather, we construct imaginative models which are always provisional and revisable. Old-style positivism is dead. Out of the ashes two groups have emerged: postmodernist relativists like P. Feyerabend, who argue that the scientific worldview of the alchemist or magician is just as valid (or invalid) as that of the Harvard physics professor, and critical realists like H. Putnam who accept the notion of models but insist that successive scientific constructs better approximate the way the world really is; models can be criticized and evaluated and genuine progress in knowledge is possible.

Religious pluralists have reacted against the religious equivalent of positivism, namely exclusivistic fundamentalism, which maintains that it alone possesses an accurate, if not exhaustive, description of God and his purposes which one must precisely believe in order to be saved. On the relativist wing, as has been demonstrated, is John Hick, who argues that the models of God in all religions are equally valid (or invalid). Keith Ward, on the other hand, is a clear example of a critical realist theologian with his notion of 'convergent pluralism'. Ward believes that important truths about God can be truly affirmed and that a more and more accurate model of him will be achieved as the truth progressively emerges through inter-faith dialogue and attention to ongoing scientific discoveries.<sup>9</sup> Like Hick, however, Ward refuses to give primacy to Christianity and he too is uncomfortable with the doctrines of incarnation and atonement.

Let me conclude with some personal jottings about the way ahead for evangelical theology. I suggest that we must refuse the temptation of either retreating back to the false security of fundamentalist positivism or falling into the arms of postmodernist relativism. Instead, we must acknowledge that theology is emergent and progressive (simple acquaintance with historical theology makes that clear enough) and we must take heed of human discoveries from whatever discipline. Further, we should be open to insights from other religions, for as C. Pinnock asks, 'Why do we look so hopefully to Plato and expect nothing from Buddha? I think we are now entering a period in history when the world religions will begin to impinge on theology as philosophy has always done'.<sup>10</sup> However, just as there are some basic elements which appear in any sound scientific model of the world (e.g. both Newton's and Einstein's diverse paradigms acknowledged the

existence of gravity but explained it differently), so we must contend that it is Jesus Christ who provides the hermeneutical key to the nature and purpose of reality, for he is the supreme exegete of God (Jn. 1:18). E. Brunner put it beautifully:

From the standpoint of Jesus Christ, the non-Christian religions seem like stammering words from some half-forgotten saying; none of them is without a breath of the Holy, and yet none of them is the Holy. None of them is without its impressive truth, and yet none of them is the truth; for their truth is Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

We need to keep in balance a strong view of both special revelation and general revelation: the specificity of God's revelation and redemptive acts, and the wideness of his mercy and loving concern for the whole human race.

We must also be willing to separate out the ontological and epistemological elements of soteriology, for while the fundamentalist exclusivist will affirm both that if Christ had not died on the cross heaven would be empty (ontological) and also that one must believe on Jesus as one's personal saviour in order to be saved (epistemological), the pluralist will deny both. It must be realized, in contrast, that it is perfectly consistent to affirm the ontological proposition as non-negotiable (i.e. humans can be saved only through Christ), while preserving some explorative agnosticism concerning the epistemological question (whether God will save any without knowledge of Christ).

Finally, we must pray for fire in the belly. Perhaps re-read Barth, who stood against a not dissimilar, laid-back, both-and liberal theology of his own day, to which he responded with *krisis* theology, portraying God not as the Unknowable devoid of qualities but as the awesome Judge who demands decision. Kierkegaard too fought passionately against the both-and accommodations of Hegelianism with such rousing declarations as, 'Either/or is the pass which admits to the absolute — God be praised! Yea, either/or is the key to heaven . . . both-and is the way to hell'.<sup>12</sup> We must be faithful servants of Yahweh, who has declared, 'I have set before you life and death. . . . Now choose life' (Dt. 30:19).

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Blackwell, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>A.S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam* (Routledge, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Macmillan, 1989), p. 246.

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed treatment of this insight see H.A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Apollos, 1991), pp. 108-111. This book provides an excellent critique of pluralism in general and J. Hick in particular.

<sup>5</sup>See R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 170-174.

<sup>6</sup>In M. Warner (ed.), *Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 89.

<sup>7</sup>W.H. Lewis (ed.), *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (Collins, 1966), p. 267.

<sup>8</sup>A. McGrath, *Making Sense of the Cross* (IVP, 1992), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup>See K. Ward, *A Vision to Pursue* (SCM, 1991).

<sup>10</sup>C. Pinnock, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions', in M.A. Noll and D.F. Wells (eds.), *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 159.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in A. Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (SCM, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>R. Bretall (ed.), *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 19.