

John Hick's Interpretation of Religion: A Perspective from South Africa

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Abstract

In his 1989 book *An Interpretation of Religion* the eminent British philosopher of religion (and formerly philosophical theologian) John Hick provided a detailed view of what he saw as world religions, involving his well-known and much-debated pluralistic hypothesis in terms of which he is able to see all those religions as valid paths to salvation/liberation. How convincing is his theory? This article addresses that question by summarizing Hick's main contentions in the 1989 book and then offering a critical discussion involving five key questions, with answers to them, from the perspective of a student of religion based in and indebted to South African traditional cultures, their beliefs and their ethics.

The eminent British philosopher of religion, John Hick, died on 9 February 2012 at the age of 90 after a short illness, which brought to an end his scholarly output. Anybody associated with the Pietermaritzburg campus of the former University of Natal in 1980 might recall that he was a visiting professor in its Department of Religious Studies in that year. By then Hick was already a world-class religious thinker, especially for his important, new answer to the problem why there is so much evil in a world governed, according to theists, by a perfect and almighty God, and for his arguments in support of belief in their Deity (Hick 1966, 1970). He had also by then become a controversial figure.

The controversy about him stemmed from his part in the sensational 1977 book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which he edited and to which he contributed a

chapter called "Jesus and the World Religions" (Hick 1977: 167-185). Written by a team of some of Britain's leading theologians and biblical experts, it argued, among other things, that the Christian doctrine of Christ as God in human form must be understood as symbolically or mythically, rather than literally, true. By the time Hick arrived in Pietermaritzburg for that visit, there was no shortage of concern among some local Christians about him. Understandably, they took the word myth to mean something that is false or fictional.

Ahead of him lay what would become his benchmark interpretation of the range of what he would later refer to as "the great world religions" (Hick 1989: 9). Each, he showed, is equally capable of producing saintliness (and also moral failure), as well as having sophisticated but often also contradictory doctrines, both internally and in relation to one another. That seemed to mean they could not all be true if taken at face value.

Against those who dismiss all religion as false, Hick developed a subtle philosophy in support of religion but without dismissing other faiths than his own as mistaken. This has become known as the pluralist position, which Hick set out in his landmark 1989 book *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. Many see this as his most important work. The chapter explaining his pluralistic hypothesis begins with the words of Jalalu'l- Din Rumi in the 13th century: "The lamps are different, but the Light is the same" (Hick 1989: 233).

This paper confines itself only to that book because it draws together Hick's earlier explorations of the diversity of religions, though there will be a number of references to Hick's earlier work where relevant. Given the detail and depth of the book, the paper further confines itself to a summary of the argument's key points as a basis for a critical discussion of five issues arising from the book. Helpfully, Hick provides a concise outline of his argument near the beginning (1989: 12-15). What follows is based on, but not confined to, that summary. It is offered as a tribute to a great scholar who welcomed criticality and whose impact on the philosophy of religion is arguably the most significant in the past half-century if not more.

Key Points in Hick's Interpretation of the Religions

The title of the book is an important indication of the character of the entire book. It is offered as an *interpretation*, not an explanation, which is a scholarly strategy of great interest to the present author (Prozesky 1984: 68ff.). Interestingly, the word "explanation" is not present in the subject index at the end of the book (Hick 1989: 411). This is an issue that is addressed in the critical discussion later in the paper.

Equally indicative of the nature of the book is the fact that Hick offers it

not just as an interpretation of religion, but as a *religious* interpretation, thereby clearly differentiating it from naturalistic interpretations which see religion as grounded solely in various aspects of our human nature or in the way society functions (1989: 1ff., 111ff.). What Hick means by religion is made clear very early in the book. It is “belief in the transcendent” (1989: 6), for which Hick’s preferred term is “the Real” (1989: 11, 252-296). This religious characterizing of the argument by Hick is also part of the critical discussions that follow.

As is well-known, Hick was a pioneer in re-thinking the implications of the diversity of religions in the world, past and present, and in advocating a pluralist interpretation of that reality which sees at least the so-called world religions as broadly equal paths of salvation or liberation to a transcendent reality (Hick 1980: 28ff.). So it is no surprise that in the book under discussion, his is a religious interpretation of *religions* (Hick 1989: 1, 36ff., 316ff.), which he limits to the numerically larger faiths that have their origins in the so-called “axial period” lasting from roughly 800 to 200 BCE. Nor is it a surprise that in this book he devotes a good deal of space to stating his pluralist hypothesis about these faiths (1989: 233-51).

A central part of his pluralistic hypothesis is the use of the cognitive phenomenon of “experiencing-as,” namely the way we humans come to understand whatever we encounter in the enveloping contexts of our lives in terms of the available concepts of our cultures. Since these differ in time and location, our world-views, bearing the imprint of those differing cultures, also differ, even when, in Hick’s view of the religions, we are responding to the same, mysterious reality of the transcendent (1989: 8, 12, 140ff.).

Using the phenomenon of “experiencing-as,” Hick can classify the religions he has in mind into two categories. One of them is the Abrahamic cluster of religions of near-eastern origin—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These experience what he terms the transcendental Real as a personal divine being (1989: 252-77). The other category comprises the South and East Asian cluster—parts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese religions—which Hick contends experience the Real as an impersonal absolute (1989: 278-96). In Part 4 of the book Hick discusses these two ways of experiencing the Real in detail, speaking of the theistic category as “the *Personae* of the Real” (1989: 252-77) and the “*Impersonae* of the Real” (1989: 278-96) respectively.

Can one of these two broad ways of experiencing the Real, or one of their constituent faiths like Islam in the Abrahamic group or Mahayana Buddhism in the other group, be judged to be truer than the other? Hick argues that they cannot, using a notion he derives from Kant’s distinction between realities in themselves, which we cannot directly know, and the way we come to form beliefs about them (1989: 240-46). On the basis of this distinction, which makes the Real as such inaccessible to our minds, Hick’s pluralist hypothesis is that the

two broad categories of religions are cognitively parallel rather than rival ways of experiencing the Real. Hick also acknowledged a similar moral ambivalence in the various faiths, whose members exhibit both ethical greatness and instances of the opposite (1989: 8f, 316ff.).

The next of Hick's ideas to be mentioned relates to the fact that an important minority of the world's peoples, especially in modern times, reject all religions as delusions in favour of what Hick calls a naturalistic world-view, which he defines in the first paragraph of the book as ones that treat religion "as a purely human phenomenon" (1989: 1, 111ff.). While himself adopting a religious stance, Hick acknowledges that the case for naturalism cannot just be dismissed or conclusively refuted. This is partly because of arguments it can muster in support of naturalism but more deeply because Hick sees the universe itself as ambiguous, and therefore capable of sophisticated interpretations by both believers and sceptics (1989: 12, 111-125).

This view connects with another of Hick's contentions, that we humans experience the world (in the broadest sense of that term), at three levels: the physical, where we have least, and at times no, freedom, the moral, where we have considerable freedom (about how to act in relation to others), and the religious, where he regards us as being most free (1989: 12ff.). Such a contention about freedom in religion is not about the human rights doctrine of freedom of belief. Its basis is Hick's idea of the Real as unknowably mysterious in itself and the way our different cultures differently shape the way we think about our experiences. The implication is that the Real does not impose its reality on anybody, but invites responses to it according to who, when and where we are, all of them being in principle valid, subject to an important, over-riding proviso.

This proviso takes Hick's interpretation of the religions into his account of the moral dimension of our experience, with the ethical criterion of generous goodwill, love and compassion as the norm by which to judge religion. This is addressed in the fifth and climactic part of the book, labeled simply "Criteriological" (1989: 297-380; cf. also 1989: 14). Hick's verdict is that the religions he has in mind all meet this criterion in their values and often but not always in practice. None can thus be judged morally better than the others, though individual believers can exhibit both moral excellence and grave moral failure in each of the traditions he has in mind.

In concluding this review of the book under discussion, it is worth repeating Hick's own eloquent opening summary of his position:

A contemporary apologetic for belief in the transcendent, then, must start from the new situation revealed by our modern awareness of religious plurality and conceptual relativity. It must see religious thought and experience as a

global continuum containing an immense variety of forms from archaic beginnings to the present still-evolving state of the great world traditions. It must recognize to the full the presence of culture-relative projection and symbolization within this long history. And it must show reason to believe that this vast and multifarious field of human faith is nevertheless not wholly projection and illusion—even though there is much projection and illusion within it—but constitutes our variously transparent and opaque interface with a mysterious transcendent reality. (1989: 9)

Critical Discussion

In this section of the paper five issues from the preceding summary of Hick's landmark book are given critical attention, being judged the most important of the book's key contentions from the perspective of a concern with African traditional ethics and religion in South Africa (Murove 2009: 3ff.), and of the naturalistic explanation of religion given in my book *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: an Explanatory Theory* (1984), where I concluded that appeal to supernatural interventions and revelations are "superfluous to the explanation of religion" (Prozesky 1984: 235). What these two perspectives mean, also, is that the present paper is not intended to engage with other critical discussions of Hick's pluralistic model of the axial faiths like that of Gavin D'Costa (based on earlier but essentially the same accounts of the model by Hick) or that of Keith Ward (D'Costa 1986; Ward 1991: 173ff.).

As a preface to the critical discussion that follows, I must make it clear that I am an admirer of Hick's work and strongly support his pluralist view of the religions that he discusses against rival views that regard one religion as exclusively true, or as including in it the partial truths present in other faiths. That said, I turn now to my first critical issue. It concerns Hick's presentation of his theory of religion as an interpretation rather than as an explanation. I include it not because it is original but as a prelude to my next critical issues, especially those that concern the Real as a purported cause underlying religion.

Simply put, interpretation offers a view of *what* the phenomenon in question is; an explanation purports to tell us *why* it exists and has the characteristics it has. It purports to identify the causes that give rise to the phenomenon (Prozesky 1984: 68-98). As such, it goes further than interpretation, which it presupposes, for one can hardly say why something exists if one has not already established what it is. While it is clear that Hick's book provides a great deal of detailed material that tells the reader what Hick contends the religions that concern him are all about, there is more to the book than this. This is his view of the

religions as culturally varied, conceptually relative responses to what he calls the Real. By this he does not merely mean something believers merely think is real but something that exists whether or not anybody believes it to be there. As such, the Real functions for Hick as the ultimate causal factor giving rise to our religions as people experience it in whatever time, place and culture has shaped their ways of understanding things. That, however, is a purported explanation of them, not just an interpretation. In simple terms, Hick's theory in effect asserts that the religions, or at least the axial ones, exist *because* there is a transcendent, objectively existing Real, to whose presence they are culturally-relative but essentially valid responses.

My second critical issue is to ask how adequate Hick's account of religion is even as just an interpretation. Even a cursory reading of the book makes it clear that Hick is exceptionally well-informed about the axial religions, so I have no reservations about that. What is a concern is the way Hick limits himself to just those axial faiths, omitting, for example, African traditional religions and all other faiths that arose before the axial period. In a book called "An Interpretation of Religion" this is a significant omission, at least for the present author and for others whose work has much to do with the religious ethics of traditional African cultures in southern Africa and elsewhere on the continent of Africa.

African traditional religions are an important reality in their own right. They are extremely long-lasting belief-systems; more importantly, they meet Hick's two most important characterizations of the axial faiths. The first one is the belief that there is a transcendent reality, mostly seen as one or more personal, spiritual beings. One instance, in Zulu traditional religion, is the belief in a creator known as *uMvelinqangi* and *uNkulunkulu* (Thorpe 1991: 35; cf. Lawson 1985: 25ff.). Hick's second characterization is ethical quality. The best evidence of this quality in African traditional religions is the concept known in the Sesotho-Setswana languages as *Botho* and in the Nguni languages of South Africa as *Ubuntu*, with closely similar concepts in most sub-Saharan traditional cultures (Murove 2009: 62-109). Signifying human inter-relatedness, it elaborates into an emphasis on respect and hospitality. So it can validly and fairly be asked whether Hick would interpret African traditional religions or those of the Australian Aboriginal people, for example, also as valid human responses to the Real, and if not, why not? And if they too can be seen as valid human responses to the Real, should they not have been included, or convincing reasons given for not doing so?

A similar question arises in connection with the naturalistic views of religion which Hick fully and fairly includes. They are part of the larger set of world-views or belief-systems that include all the religions, and they offer their own reasons for rejecting religion. Hick accepts their plausibility, so it is arguable that Hick's interpretation would have gained further interest and influence if it

had given grounds for holding that despite such plausibility, positing the Real as an objectively existing cause for the axial religions has greater plausibility than any naturalistic view of religion. Such grounds would also show why believers continue to find them convincing when important naturalistic critics argue that religion is a delusion. That would add weight to the case for supporting a religious view of religion.

The absence of this kind of treatment of naturalistic alternatives to religious belief brings me to my third critical issue. I have already mentioned that Hick sees the focus of faith in the axial religions as an objective reality, and I have contended that Hick in effect sees what he calls the Real as the ultimate cause giving rise to the axial faiths. But there is a serious debate about whether any such supposed transcendent reality actually exists, a debate Hick repeatedly and very fairly acknowledges (1989: 111-125).

Suppose the naturalistic critics of religion are correct. That would invalidate the appeal to the supposed Real as the underlying cause of religion. Hick could of course have replied to this contention by saying he gives grounds for trusting that his own (and other religious people's) experiences of a transcendent reality are valid and not deluded, so that he and they are rationally entitled to their belief in the Real. I think that is a logically justified response, but it leaves unanswered the most important question about religion: are believers in fact justified in holding that some kind of transcendent reality actually exists, when others, no less informed, intelligent and ethical, report the very opposite, the experience of *the absence* of any such supposed reality? Despite the massive amount of extremely valuable material in Hick's book, it does, therefore strike the present author as falling short of providing the fullest account of religion by leaving its own core contention unresolved as to whether it is a fiction or not. Is there not something unsatisfactory about a position which posits significant plausibility in contradictory views?

My fourth critical issue is that Hick's account of the experience of the Real is incomplete through insufficient attention to the beneficent character believers in most or even all religions say, as its hallmark. Hick posits the Real on the basis of religious experience across the spectrum of faiths and is certainly correct about this, differently though the various faith traditions conceive of it. Religious adherents do indeed firmly believe that they are in touch with a transcendent reality. But the classic studies of first-hand reports of religious experience by William James, Edwin Starbuck, and later by Alister Hardy, though mostly limited to Christianity, make it quite clear that the believer's sense of being in touch with a higher, spiritual power involves a powerful element of benefit in the experience coming from that power (James 1902; Starbuck 1914; Hardy 1979).

Whether it be relief, joy, the lifting of a painful emotional or intellectual burden, solace about death, healing and the like, the common thread is that

something profoundly *good* comes to the believer in that time of connection with the Real, as Hick repeatedly calls it. Having made a pilot study of multi-faith reports of religious experience in the former South African province of Natal, having personally worked through a very large, random sample of Hardy's data myself, and having extended the research to the classical texts of faiths other than Christianity such as the Jewish scriptures, the Qur'an, the Bhagavadgita, and Buddhist and Chinese texts (all in translation), I can confirm the point about other religions than just Christianity. Whatever else the supposedly transcendent source of religion is, it is experienced as the source of life's most valuable benefits, or blessings, as many believers would say (Prozesky 1984: 19-22).

So I argue that if experience is what we use in order to account for religion and to claim that such experience is evidence of an objectively real transcendent source, then that source, as experienced, should be described in ethical as well as ontological terms—as both good and real. Despite important attention to other ethical issues in the book, Hick does not do this. His Kantian-derived concept of a Real that is unknowably mysterious in itself logically requires him to say nothing more about it, but that strikes the present author as being in conflict with religious experience and belief.

This last contention brings me to my fifth and final critical issue which concerns Hick's criteriology. As was mentioned earlier in this paper, Hick subjects the axial faiths to ethical evaluation, seeing them as offering different but effective paths to the ultimate benefit of salvation or liberation, a view I regard as correct on the basis of detailed comparative research (Prozesky 1984: 18-50). Subjecting religion to ethical evaluation is a step that I myself strongly endorse. It gives his theory of religion great ethical power, which none of the reservations expressed in the preceding critical points outweigh. It also invites new research on the ethical status of religion. Hick is no longer with us to take that further step, so such research is part of the imposing legacy of his pioneering work, providing an opportunity of great importance for others to pursue in the future.

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