

The Pluralism of John Hick

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Once upon a time Christians were identifiable by an unqualified commitment to Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of the world. But the unity of Christians on this fundamental issue has disappeared. Today many people who claim to be Christians choose among three fundamentally different answers to the question, “Is Jesus the only Savior?” These answers can be stated succinctly: No! Yes, but . . . Yes, period!

The negative answer—the belief that Jesus is not the only Savior—is commonly called *pluralism*. People holding this view think that there are many paths to salvation and that Jesus is only one of them.

The unqualified affirmative answer (Yes, period!) is undoubtedly the one that most readers of this article identify with. This view is often called *exclusivism* because it teaches that there is one exclusive way whereby men and women can approach God and receive his salvation: Jesus Christ. Sometimes this position is called *restrictivism* because it teaches that salvation is restricted to people who come to have explicit faith in Jesus Christ.

The qualified affirmative answer (Yes, but . . .) is the favored view of a growing number of Christian college and seminary professors. But it is also held by many pastors, Christian workers, and denominational leaders who were introduced to the theory by their professors. This position is commonly called *inclusivism* because its adherents believe that the scope of God’s salvation is significantly wider than that held by exclusivists. It is so wide or broad that it includes many people who have not explicitly believed in Jesus.

I have dealt with the whole range of issues related to this matter in my book, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*¹ In this article, I will examine the position known as pluralism. To save time, I have chosen to focus on the work of John Hick, the person who is probably the best known religious pluralist in the part of the world we loosely refer to as Christendom. A

¹ See Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). This article is adapted from the latter title by permission of the publisher.

pluralist is a person who thinks humans may be saved through a number of different religious traditions and saviors.

The Pluralism of John Hick

John Hick explains his own pluralism this way: “There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation . . . taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions.”²

The development of Hick’s pluralism went through two stages. The earlier stage of Hick’s thinking extended roughly from about 1970 to 1980. The changes that occurred after 1980 contain the theories for which he is best known. It is legitimate to ask why I spend time on his earlier positions which he has abandoned. The reason is this: it is important to see that Hick’s current positions did not appear in a mature, fully developed form. It first took root and then grew sometimes fitfully, as Hick tried first one move and then another to make his evolving view of pluralism work. Tracing some of those early steps can be instructive. Far too many people act as though all that is required to prove pluralism is simply to assert it dogmatically. To claim that there is only one way to God, only one Savior, is so narrow-minded, so intolerant, so contrary to common sense, and so on. It is actually a humbling experience to discover how extremely difficult it is to establish religious pluralism as a plausible theory. John Hick’s early attempts to do just this failed miserably and what demonstrated the disastrous nature of his early arguments came from criticisms he received from non-Christian scholars.

The second stage of Hick’s pluralism marked a major break with elements of his earlier position. In fact, the reason that Hick developed his second stage (from 1980 to the present) was because his first attempt at pluralism was such an embarrassing defeat. Understanding the mistakes of the first stage will make it easier for us to reach a judgment about the value of stage two.

The First Stage of Hick’s Pluralism

During the early 1970s John Hick regarded what he thought of as his new approach to world religions as so radical that he began to describe it as a Copernican Revolution in religion. As Hick saw things, Christian exclusivism (the belief that people can only be saved by knowing about Jesus and believing in Jesus) is analogous to the old, outdated Ptolemaic model of the solar system. Claudius Ptolemy, the astronomer and mathematician who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, from around A.D. 100 to 170, taught what is called the geocentric theory of the solar system and

² John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 34.

pictured the sun and the planets as revolving around the earth. Ptolemy's view was challenged by the heliocentric, or sun-centered, theory proposed by the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543).

Hick's self-described Copernican alternative to Ptolemy's theory involved the removal of Christianity from any exalted or exclusive place at the center of the world's religions. Just as Copernicus replaced the earth-centered paradigm with a sun-centered model, so Hick proposed to replace the historic Christian view that Jesus Christ is the center of the religious universe with the claim that God is the center. This amounts to abandoning a Christocentric view of the world's religions with a theocentric model. The historic Christian position that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ must now be abandoned, according to Hick. His alternative sees all the world religions rotating around God, not Jesus.

Many students of astronomy are surprised to learn how well the old Ptolemaic model worked in explaining the apparent motion of the planets. One reason for its success resulted from the skill of Ptolemaic astronomers in designing what are called *epicycles*. An epicycle was an orbit on an orbit, such as the orbit of the moon around the earth, which in turn is orbiting around the sun. There were times when the Ptolemaic astronomers could only explain certain motions of heavenly bodies by postulating orbits on orbits on orbits. Such complexity in the Ptolemaic model of the solar system eventually became a major reason why many astronomers after Copernicus and Kepler abandoned the earlier paradigm.³ Ever since, the epicycles of the old Ptolemaic theory have served as an example of arbitrary and contrived theorizing, not based on evidence, adopted solely to enhance the plausibility of the theory. According to Hick, the religious analogue of Ptolemy's model is any view that places Christianity at the center of the world's religions. Hick denigrates attempts to protect Christianity from the challenge of the world's religions by comparing the Christian's efforts to the epicycles of the Ptolemaic system. That is, the efforts of any who believe Jesus is the only Savior are contrived and arbitrary. Their efforts, Hick thinks, are not prompted by an honest attempt to conform theory to evidence, but are merely tinkering with one's model so as to continue delaying its inevitable demise.

Was This "Revolution" Necessary?

One reason why Hick thought his Copernican Revolution was necessary was his growing awareness in the early 1970s of saintly and holy people

³ For more details, see Nash, *Is Jesus the only Savior?* 23-24.

in non-Christian religions.⁴ But does encountering pious, devout, and even saintly non-Christians prove the truth of pluralism? During the first stage in the development of his pluralism, Hick also appealed to the notion of an all-loving God. He believed that the existence of an all-loving God required the rejection of any form of Christian exclusivism. The more Hick thought about it, the more convinced he became that a loving God would not exclude *anyone* from his salvation.

Ironically, Hick himself provided the major reason why this line of thinking had to be rejected. Hick recognized that pluralism could not succeed if any specific knowledge about God is possible. Suppose we knew, for example, that personal monotheism is true. We could then know that polytheism and pantheism are false. But if we know that pantheism is false, then, we can hardly continue to view pantheistic systems as paths to God that function on an equal footing with theism. And so we find Hick conceding that God as he, she or it really is, is unknowable.

But when Hick then appeals to the love of God as the ground of one of his convictions, he is clearly contradicting himself. A loving God is a supreme being with known properties. As soon as we can legitimately ascribe any properties to God, problems arise for the pluralist, specifically because *that* God with *those* attributes (such as love) will conflict with the gods of other religious systems who do not possess those attributes or that set of properties.

Hick wants it both ways. On the one hand, he promoted a pluralistic, non-Christian approach to the world religions; on the other hand, all his talk about a loving, personal God sounds a lot like Christianity. If, as Hick insists, no one can have any knowledge about God, then no one can know that the Supreme Being is a loving God. But if we cannot know *this*, then we can hardly use information that we cannot know—that God is love—as the basis of an attack on exclusivism.

Hick also argued that religious beliefs are typically a result of geographic and cultural conditioning. Someone born in Dallas, Texas, is most likely going to be a Christian. Guess what that person would be if born in Sri Lanka, Mecca, Tokyo, Tehran or New Delhi? A just and loving God would hardly punish people for what is basically an accident of birth. But again we see how difficult it is for Hick to avoid this essentially self-defeating line of thinking. The argument falters unless he can free his appeal to geographic and cultural conditioning from references to divine love.

⁴ See the early pages of John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

Problems with Hick's First Stage

Hick's movement away from important aspects of his early pluralism was hardly an accident. He changed his position on some issues because it became clear he had to do so. An examination of Hick's reasons for changing his mind provides some interesting insights regarding both Hick and his pluralism.

We noticed how Hick's Copernican Revolution had removed Jesus from any central place in relation to the world's religions and replaced him with an all-loving God. Hick failed to appreciate that many non-Christians would regard his appeal to an all-loving God as an insult, or even worse from Hick's standpoint, as a new kind of exclusivism. Such non-Christians saw clearly how Hick was still operating under the influence of a "narrow" Judeo-Christian type of thinking. To be all-loving, the God operating at the center of Hick's system would have to be a *personal* God. But many religious systems express believe in a non-personal Supreme Principle; others neither affirm nor deny the existence of a personal God.

Hick ascribed not only personality to his God, but also biblical attributes such as love. This created a dilemma. If the "God" of his New theocentric approach to religion were personal, then Hick would appear guilty of excluding non-personalistic views of God (pantheism). But if, by contrast, he opted for a non-personal God at the center, then he would be excluding religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that understand God as personal. Since one of Hick's objectives was tolerance as opposed to "closed-minded Christians," it would not help his cause if Hick appeared intolerant toward anyone.

All this was embarrassing for another reason. It suggests that Hick knew in advance what he wanted his conclusions to be and was simply cutting the cloth to fit the customer. Was not Hick simply churning out his own arbitrary, *ad hoc* epicycles? He who had set himself up as the radical revolutionary rejecting such evils as exclusivism, intolerance, and epicyclic imaginings appeared to be guilty of these very sins. Clearly he had to do something.

Hick's first search for a way out of his dilemma found him arguing that God was both personal and impersonal, as though this would make his system big enough to include theists, pantheists, and everyone else he wanted. But a little reflection shows how unsatisfactory that move was. The world contains some square objects and some round objects, but it does not and cannot contain objects that are round and square at the same time. Likewise, reality might contain a personal God or an impersonal god, but it is logically impossible for God to be both personal and impersonal at the same time.

Hick's Unknowable God

In the midst of all this, Hick was also denying that humans could know God.⁵ At that time, in 1973, denying the knowability of God had assumed the status of an initiatory rite into the mysteries of neo-liberal theology.⁶ So it is unclear whether Hick's adoption of theological agnosticism was anything more than a less-than-thoughtful surrender to the liberal *Zeitgeist*. Eventually, however, the unknowability of God would prove to be a key step in Hick's attempt to rescue his Copernican Revolution from all kinds of difficulties.

What Hick failed to see, however, is that his affirming God's unknowability only created new problems. Here is why. Hick tells us that God is unknowable. But in making this claim, Hick reveals at least two things that he knows about God. For one thing, he knows that there is a God. Second, to claim that God is unknowable is already to know something very significant about God. If God really were unknowable, then we should be unable to know that he is unknowable.

Hick faced another difficulty. His claims about the unknowability of God have impressed a number of authors that Hick has moved towards a view of God found in certain Asian religions. Theologian C. Forrester, for example, concludes that Hick's ideas would be most acceptable to followers of the Vedanta strain of Hinduism.⁷ But if this were so, Hick's early theory would have had the ironic consequence of replacing Christian exclusivism with the view of a particular Hindu sect. Thus Hick would only have replaced one alleged Ptolemaic position with one of his own. He would have rejected one version of exclusivism with what amounted to a Hickian version of exclusivism.

It seems clear that Hick's first attempt at a Copernican Revolution was a philosophical and theological disaster. Instead of his early attempt at pluralism flowing logically from a set of plausible premises, the reverse seems to have been the case. Hick started with a conclusion (Jesus is not the only Savior) and then sought premises to support it. The opponent of a Ptolemaic-type exclusivism had ensnared himself in his own version of it. The self-described enemy of theological epicycles had invented his own.

⁵ See Hick's *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 178.

⁶ For examples, see Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), chs. 1-3.

⁷ C. Forrester, "Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976): 69.

The Second Stage of Hick's Pluralism

Stage one of Hick's evolving pluralism was his move from a Christ-centered approach to religion to a God-centered model. During the 1980s Hick moved from this theocentric theory to a salvation-centered model. A necessary step in understanding these changes in Hick's thinking is to notice several points that he borrowed from the influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant who died in 1804.

Kant distinguished between the way the world appears to us (the phenomenal world) and the way the world really is (the noumenal world).⁸ The so-called phenomenal world is the world as it appears to human consciousness; these appearances necessarily reflect the organizing powers of the human mind. The world that appears to us is not necessarily the way the world really is; it is more correct to think of the phenomenal world as a product of the ways our mind forces us to conceive it. All this points to another world "behind" the world of appearance; this is, for Kant, the real world or, in his terminology, the *noumenal* world.

Basic to Hick's move to a second stage of pluralism is his distinction between the phenomenal God and the noumenal God. Hick believes the distinction is justified because of the many different and sometimes conflicting ways that the real God (the noumenal God) appears to people in the different religions of the world (the phenomenal God). All of the phenomenal concepts of God we encounter in the religions of the world are misleading and inadequate. What we should be seeking is God as it, he, or she is in itself.

Hick's New Theory of the Unknown God

In Hick's second stage, he drops the word "God" from his vocabulary. The old term, he decides, is simply too loaded with Christian connotations. "God" is replaced by such words as *Reality* or the *Real* or *Ultimate Reality*.⁹ This major switch in Hick's position was clearly an attempt to escape the mistakes he made in the first stage of his pluralism, which often found him operating with elements of an older, more theistic, even Christian concept of God. Consistent pluralists should not do that sort of thing.

Hick does provide an interesting example to illustrate his distinction between the many phenomenal gods that advocates of the world religions claim to know and the unknowable noumenal Reality behind or beyond

⁸ For a more complete account of Kant's theory, see Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), ch.11.

⁹ See John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 158.

the phenomenal. He appeals to an old story about five blind men walking through a jungle who come across an elephant in a clearing. After each of the blind men has touched the animal, one identifies the animal as a snake (the trunk), another as a fan (an ear), another as a rope (the tail), another as a pillar (a leg), and the last as a wall (the body).¹⁰ Similarly, each of the world's religions describes a different facet of Ultimate Reality. Each religion possesses a partial truth but the whole of the Ultimately Real (Hick's so-called noumenal God) is unknown and unknowable. Even though Hick's God is unknowable, he contends that it is plausible to believe that something Real stands behind the various religious experiences of the world's religions and that the Real is essentially the same thing experienced in different, even conflicting, ways.¹¹

Hick's earlier pluralism saw him wrestling with a God who was both personal and impersonal. Hick's distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal God helped him escape the contradiction in his position of the 1970s. He made the quite different claim that the Real or Ultimate could be authentically thought of and experienced as both personal and non-personal.¹²

Christians, Jews and Muslims perceive the Real as personal, whereas believers in some other religions experience the Ultimate as impersonal. None of these experiences give us the Real as it really is. Instead, each results from the Real affecting different people within the contexts of differing religious traditions. But of course the noumenal God is still unknowable. We cannot know whether it is one or many, personal or impersonal, good or evil, or purposive and purposeless. Given all this, we really cannot know whether the noumenal god might turn out to be the evil deities of Jim Jones or David Koresh, two religions that Hick eliminates from the list of plausible religions. Indeed, we cannot even eliminate the possibility that Hick's noumenal God might turn out to be Satan. Hick is really claiming that a large number of conflicting experiences, all of an unknown God whom we should not even call "God," are somehow supposed to bring us closer to a more accurate understanding of that which is essentially unknowable.

Hick insists that no predicates can be applied to the Real. This means that we cannot say that God is loving or all-knowing or all-powerful or holy or a spirit or a person. Is it not natural, then, to suppose that Hick's words for God have no significant content? Once we have unpacked the

¹⁰ I sometimes tell students that we should be thankful there were only five blind men. What other parts of the elephant might have been discovered by additional blind men?

¹¹ Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 178.

¹² See John Hick, "The Theology of Pluralism," *Theology* 86 (1983): 337.

ramifications of Hick's radical theological skepticism, why should we not hold instead, as philosopher David Basinger says, "that there is no higher Reality beyond us and thus all religious claims are false . . . or why not adopt the exclusivistic contention that the religious claims of only one perspective are true?"¹³ When you begin by stating that point A in your system is the recognition that humans cannot know anything about God, how can you rationally get from point A to point B—or anywhere, for that matter?

More Detail on Hick's View of Salvation

As we have seen, Hick first abandoned a Christocentric view of religion for one that was God-centered. When that failed, he turned to a salvation-centered view of religion. But once a person identifies salvation as the ultimate test of a genuine religion, everything begins to turn on how "salvation" is defined. Consider the options:

If salvation is the attainment of illumination, then Buddhism can save.

If salvation is union with a Universal self, then Hinduism can save.

If salvation is forgiveness and justification, then Christianity can save.

But if salvation is defined as overthrowing an oppressor class and establishing a classless society, when can't we say that communism can save as well? Did not those systems that practiced child-sacrifice or mutilation or cannibalism also offer what they thought was salvation? Did not Jim Jones offer his followers salvation, even if it came in the form of kool-aid laced with arsenic? Is not Hick's appeal to salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment so vague and general that he ends up offering a kind of religious supermarket with countless paths to salvation? Of course, Hick tries to avoid this kind of chaos by insisting that all legitimate forms of salvation exhibit one common trait, namely, a movement from a state of self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. But how does Hick arrive at this particular concept of salvation? Hick's propensity to oversimplify becomes apparent once we remember that the world's religions not only understand the Ultimate differently (for some of these religions, there is no Ultimate), but also differ in their understanding of the basic human predicament and the means by which humans are delivered (saved) from this predicament. As much as he might like to try, Hick cannot escape the pivotal question of truth.

¹³ David Basinger, "Hick's Religious Pluralism and 'Reformed Epistemology': A Middle Ground," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 422.

Pluralism and the Question of Truth

Biblically faithful Christians believe that the proposition “Jesus Christ is God Incarnate” is true. Muslims believe that the proposition “Jesus Christ is not God Incarnate” is true. According to John Hick’s pluralism, these two propositions should not be viewed as contradictory. Hick tries to justify this by denying that apparently conflicting truth-claims within the religions of the world really are truth-claims.

Hick believes that religious “truth” differs considerably from the kind of truth we encounter in everyday life. Instead of being a property of propositions, religious truth is *personal*; it is the kind of truth that transforms and changes a person’s life. Pluralists like Hick consider it misleading to talk about the supposed truth of Christ’s resurrection as though this were merely an event in the objective world of history.¹⁴ Christ’s supposed resurrection only becomes true insofar as it transforms individual people. Hence, no religion is true in the objective or propositional sense. But all religions are true subjectively! And of course, this personal, subjective view of religious truth ends up implying that the same religious claim (proposition) can be true for me and false for you. It also implies that a religious proposition that was false for me yesterday can *become* true tomorrow.

Hick transforms religious doctrines into myths or pictures that help direct humans toward the infinite, unknowable, divine reality.¹⁵ Hick’s reduction of religious beliefs and doctrines to myth is totally foreign to the way most religious believers understand their faiths.

What Should Non-Christians Think of Hick’s Theory of Religious Truth?

In almost everything he writes about pluralism, John Hick leaves the impression that the people he most hopes will accept his views are the stubborn Christian exclusivists of the world. He leaves little doubt that he regards this Christian recalcitrance as a product of ignorance, prejudice, intolerance, and no small amount of cultural conditioning—all defects that Hick himself presumes to be free of. It is important to recognize that many non-Christians have their own good reasons to reject Hick’s work. This is certainly the case with Hick’s handling of the issue of propositional truth in other religions.

It defies common sense to suppose that the people who utter all the competing claims we find in the major religions believe they doing anything other than truly describing the nature of reality. Not only are the

¹⁴ See Ronald Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 2002). Chs. 3-4.

¹⁵ See Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 178-79.

things they say apparent truth-claims to our minds, the people who utter them understand them to be truth-claims. Basic to Hick's approach to the world religions is the conviction that regardless of what the followers of these religions think they are doing, pluralists know better. This is hardly convincing as a foundation for interreligious tolerance.

It simply will not do to downplay, ignore, or minimize the serious and very real differences among the world religions. The major religions conflict at the level of essential doctrine. The pluralist claim that doctrinal disputes are irrelevant because they have little or nothing to do with propositional truth flies in the face of the evidence. Most religions insist that correct believing is a necessary condition for salvation. This is certainly true in the case of Christianity (Acts 16:31 and John 3:16). Parallels to this can be found in non-Christian religions.¹⁶ According to William Christian, attempts to play down the major disagreements among the world's religions by suggesting that they all teach pretty much the same thing "seem very implausible, and certainly much current talk in the aid of these views is loose and sentimental."¹⁷

It is hard to deny that the world's major religions contain some false teaching. Naturally, Muslim or Buddhist exclusivists will think the errors are to be found in systems other than their own. Moreover, the millions of non-Christians in the world will not be satisfied with the distortions that pluralists like Hick introduce into their beliefs.

Hick's View of Jesus Christ

Hick acknowledges that if the orthodox Christian understanding of Jesus Christ is correct, then pluralism must be false.¹⁸ If Jesus really is God Incarnate, then he must be the only Savior. Hick must do everything possible to attack the historic Christian beliefs about the person and work of Christ. He must use every weapon at his disposal to deny such Christian doctrines as the deity of Christ, the Incarnation, and the Trinity. Astute readers of Hick's efforts in this matter will realize that he provides little or no argumentation for his positions. What Hick presents is for the most part pure speculation or mere dogmatism.

Hick's major moves to denigrate the divine personhood of Jesus and his work of salvation include the following. First, he simply asserts that the biblical picture of Jesus is only a myth. Second, he claims that Jesus never claimed to be God. Third, he offers an explanation for how, over a long period of time, the early Christians turned the human Jesus into

¹⁶ See Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 232.

¹⁷ William A. Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of Dialogue Among Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 5.

¹⁸ See Hick's "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), 180.

God. Fourth, he then denies the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian faith. Fifth, as part of this essentially unitarian position, he attacks the dependability of the New Testament. Hick's initial thunder and lightning about the Incarnation turns out to be no more than a series of dogmatic assertions grounded on badly outdated New Testament scholarship. Separated from any relevant arguments that might function as a ground for his claims, his assertions reveal much about Hick's present state of thinking but mount no serious challenge to the Christology of the historic church. For more detail on these and other matters concerning the deity of Christ, the reader should consult chapter five of my book, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*

The Issue of Alleged Intolerance

Pluralists and many of their allies often accuse exclusivism of being immoral. Christian exclusivists are said to be guilty of intolerance for holding that religious beliefs that are logically incompatible with what Christians believe must be false. Of course, pluralists seem to forget that the same kind of intolerance must then be attributed to Jewish, Muslim and Hindu exclusivists. In addition to alleged Christian intolerance, any number of other moral failings including elitism, arrogance, spiritual pride, imperialism, triumphalism, and arbitrariness can be found in the same neighborhood.¹⁹

While I have met a few exclusivists who exhibited moral failings like those mentioned, I have no reason to think that these attitudes were a direct consequence of their exclusivism. Many people are mean and nasty in expressing their ideas, including lots of non-exclusivists. That I do not believe all the things you believe hardly makes me guilty of intolerance. If disagreeing entails an explicit or implicit condemnation of certain beliefs, then by implication the dissenter displays the attitude and conviction that his or her beliefs are superior to mine. However, we should note, Hick himself dissents from the beliefs held by exclusivists. So the criticism cuts both ways. Hick falls prey to the same moral failings he attributes to exclusivists.

Some people hold that any difference of opinion implies rejection of the person. Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis suggest that pluralists seem "to believe that you can only be nice to people if you agree with them. This seems clearly false. It is both logically and practically possible for us, as Christians, to respect and revere worthy representatives of other traditions while still believing—on rational grounds—that some aspects

¹⁹ See John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), viii.

of their world-view are simply mistaken.”²⁰ Person A might like, respect, and trust person B even though B believes some clearly false propositions. So it is clear disagreeing with other people is not necessary immoral in some way.

It is helpful to distinguish between two kinds of tolerance. Moral tolerance is total acceptance of the other person as a human being who has a right to be treated with dignity and respect, even though he or she holds beliefs quite different from mine. The opposite of this is moral intolerance. All sorts of people may be guilty of moral intolerance; some may be exclusivists, but there is no necessary link between the two.

A different kind of tolerance appears when I am forbidden to judge or criticize the beliefs of anyone who disagrees with me. This second, unlabeled kind of tolerance insists that it is wrong, always and everywhere, to disagree with anyone who disagrees with me. Although some may choose to treat this position as a form of tolerance, thereby endowing it with an aura of saintliness, it is in fact a type of intellectual suicide. While Hick advances his cause by confusing these two kinds of tolerance and intolerance, he himself does not hesitate to disagree with anyone who disagrees with his pluralism. Yet it is the second type of intolerance—the kind that Hick himself practices—that is part and parcel of the moral attacks Hick and other pluralists make on exclusivists.

What about attempts to convert non-Christians to Christianity—is not that a display of intolerance? While evangelizing and proselytizing are sometimes carried out in an unworthy manner, I fail to see how any respectful attempt to persuade another person to change his or her beliefs can be an instance of intolerance.

Nor does exclusivism obligate Christians to believe that everything taught by a non-Christian religion must be false. Christian exclusivists can recognize truthful concepts in other religions as well as valuable psychological and moral insights. Exclusivism need not entail narrow-mindedness, arrogance, insensitivity, or self-righteousness. Upon closer examination, the moral attack on exclusivism appears shallow, unsound, hypocritical, and peevish and should be turned back upon the people who raise it. To assault people in such a personal way without justification is itself a moral failing.

Geographic and Cultural Conditioning

One of Hick’s earliest grounds for rejecting exclusivism is its alleged indifference to what he regards as the role of geographic and cultural conditioning in determining religious beliefs. No one should be surprised

²⁰ Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis, “On Grading Religions, Seeing Truth, and Being Nice to People—a Reply to Professor Hick,” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 77.

to find that people born in New Delhi, India, become Hindus any more than that someone born in Cisco, Texas, becomes a Baptist.

How this information is relevant to adjudging the truth or falsity of the Christian faith is unclear. Consider some of the dubious implications of Hick's position. Hick's view that truth is a function of geography and cultural conditioning, that is, where people happen to be born has some absurd consequences. This idea, carried to its logical implications, would make Nazism, cannibalism, infanticide, and witchcraft true because they could all be a result of geographic and cultural conditioning. Hick's position also implies that beliefs can be true and false at the same time, true for people conditioned in one way and false for others. Furthermore, it reminds us that the supposed truth of pluralism is also a function of geographic and cultural conditioning.

Roger Trigg notes, "Hick's argument, so far from encouraging us to give equal respect to all world religions, makes us wonder whether religion is any more valid than atheism,"²¹ which also would be a function of geographic and cultural conditioning. Trigg finds it ironic that when Hick uses this appeal to encourage greater agreement between Christians and non-Christians, he "can only proceed by emptying the claims of either or both, of all real content."²²

The biggest dilemma for Hick's contentions, however, is that he himself, born under cultural conditions that might be expected to produce a Christian, was converted to his present non-Christian, quasi-Eastern religious variety of pluralism.

Exclusivism, Pluralism, and the Love of "God"

We need to say something further about Hick's argument that Christian exclusivism is inconsistent with any adequate notion of divine love. Hick has specifically in mind the Christian doctrine of hell. Surely an all-loving God would save non-Christians.

It is difficult to see how this argument fits with Hick's commitment to religious skepticism. We have noted that Hick feels strongly that God is unknown and unknowable. God is so unknowable, in fact, that the divine being should not even be called "God" any more. To abandon this skepticism would create serious problems for Hick's whole system of thought. So if Hick, the religious skeptic par excellence, insists on raising this charge, he can only do so on pain of contradicting himself.

But perhaps Hick's argument is merely hypothetical. Perhaps he intends to say that because Christians insist that God is love, their belief

²¹ Roger Trigg, "Religion and the Threat of Relativism," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 298.

²² *Ibid.*

in divine love is incompatible with their horrible assertions of eternal judgment. Fair enough, but then we Christians must also point out that the Scriptures and Christian doctrine clearly teach that God has attributes other than love. He is also holy, an attribute that points to both the unqualified purity of his nature and also his holy hatred of sin. God's holy hatred of sin is analogous to the hatred a mother feels upon seeing a poisonous serpent about to strike a young child. Never once in his pluralist writings do I recall John Hick's mentioning the holiness of God. And the reason should be obvious: Universalists have no place in their theology for divine holiness.

The love of God that is such a matter of sentimental reverence for universalists is actually a holy love. It is a love that will not and cannot ignore human sin—hence the cross of Christ (John 3:16). Nor can God's attributes be treated adequately without reference to God's holy justice. The major question that concerns Paul in his letter to the Romans is, "How can God be just and be the justifier of sinful men and women?" In universalist and pluralist systems, this question has absolutely no standing. But it is a fundamental matter of Christian belief. A God who possesses the attributes of holy love and holy justice cannot pretend that sinners have not sinned. The punishment for sin is death. And so either sinners are punished for their own sins or else God takes their punishment upon himself. This truth is the heart of Christian belief.

Hick's Hidden Religious Agenda

John Hick still describes himself as a "Christian" in the loose, essentially content-less sense that the term holds for many people today. Yet I mean no ill will when I say that Hick is not a Christian in any historical, traditional, or biblical sense of the word. This is not being unkind; it is only being accurate.

But more attention needs to be given to the extremely vague contours of the religious system Hick is recommending. Some observers of Hick's recent work have noted how closely his basic ideas resemble certain Eastern ways of talking about Ultimate Reality. In my book about Hick, I highlight Hick's advocacy of Eastern religious thought with Hick's own comparison of Buddhist *sunyata* to the Real.²³ Because of Hick's shaky "Christianity," philosopher Doug Geivett feels that more attention should be given to the impact of Hick's pluralism on people who have doubts about their own religious heritage. As Geivett writes, "It would seem that many religious believers could only accept the pluralistic hypothesis at the cost of drastically reconceiving the nature of their own particular

²³ See Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, ch. 2.

faith tradition. This, of course, is precisely what John Hick has done himself.”²⁴

One of my purposes has been to reveal the high price that must be paid by any evangelical Protestant or traditional Roman Catholic who may feel attracted to pluralism or who, at least, feels moved by some of its claims. Any Christians who would become pluralists must cease being Christians. They must also, for that matter, commit themselves to what amounts to a version of a non-Christian faith. But the same price must be paid by Jewish and Muslim believers who might feel attracted to pluralism. While pluralism’s natural home is a small set of off-shoots of the larger Eastern religions, the majority of devotees will find that movement toward pluralism will require them also to reject major distortions of their faith.

Conclusion

John Hick has a prominent standing among those who teach and write about the major world religions. He also speaks as a self-professed “Christian” intellectual. This explains why many people’s ideas about Christianity and the world religions are being filtered through the grid of Hick’s theories. Hick’s approach to Christianity and religion is presented to many college and seminary students as brilliant, compassionate, and tolerant. For this reason, Hick’s ideas are having a far greater influence than they deserve. One hopes that Hick’s views will be examined ever more carefully and that the unstable foundations of his theory will lead to a more realistic and justly negative evaluation of his claims. Pluralism is hardly an intellectually responsible place to find an alternative to the Christian faith.

²⁴ Doug Geivett, “John Hick’s Approach to Religious Pluralism,” *Proceedings of the Wheaton College Theology Conference* (1993), vol. 1, *The Challenge of Religious Pluralism: An Evangelical Analysis and Response*, 50.