

John Hick's Religious World

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Introduction

John Hick is eminently readable. He is a theologian who wears his heart on his sleeve. He has no time for the kind of theology which uses traditional language without making clear whether such language is to be taken literally.

Hick puts his cards on the table. There is no way he will entertain anything other than a thoroughly demythologized theology. Thus the pluralist theology of John Hick and the theology of conservative evangelicalism are poles apart. Nevertheless, the conservative evangelical may benefit from Hick's frankness. We know exactly where we stand with Hick, who says what he means without worrying about whose sensitivities he is offending. The evangelical who is in dialogue with other less radical theologies than that of Hick has to spend time over questions of basic comprehension. With Hick, he can concentrate on responding to his theology without being sidetracked by the issue of correct interpretation.

It is often said that in order to understand a theology, we need to understand something of the theologian's development and progress. This is particularly true in the case of Hick. He began his theological development as a conservative evangelical. He has moved via theodicy to universalism, and then to a demythologized Christ. Commenting on his concern with theodicy, as reflected in his early book *Evil and the God of Love*. Hick writes: '(I)n wrestling with the problem of evil I had concluded that any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures.'¹

Taking this stance on universalism, Hick questions the viability of the view that the only way of salvation is the Christian way: 'Can we accept the conclusion that the God of love who seeks to save all mankind has nevertheless ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can receive this salvation? It is the weight of this moral contradiction which has driven Christian thinkers in modern times to explore other ways of understanding the human religious situation.'² At the heart of Hick's own exploration of other ways of understanding the human religious situation lies a demythologized Christ. This view of Christ, for which Hick was to gain both fame and notoriety through his book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, may be summed up thus: The incarnation is 'a mythic expression of the experience of salvation through Christ... (which) is not to be set in opposi-

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tion to the myths of other faiths as if myths were literally true-or-false assertions'.³

¹ *God Has Many Names* (Macmillan, London, 1980) p. 4.

² *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Macmillan, London, 1973) pp. 122-3.

³ *ibid* ix.

This brief summary of Hick's theological development raises the issue of whether or not he has begged some important questions. We might well ask such questions as these—

Is it true that any viable Christian theology must affirm the universal salvation of all God's creatures?

Is it self-evident that there is a moral contradiction between God's desire to save all mankind and the view that not all will receive salvation?

How legitimate is it to write off biblical teaching about Jesus Christ as mythology which has nothing to do with literally true-or-false assertions?

Hick and the Contemporary Scene

The question now arises of the relationship between the problems Hick addresses and the theology he propounds. We have the impression of the problems creating the theology rather than the theology working with the problems. Is this not a case of the tail wagging the dog?

Hick writes as though a modern theology must make drastic changes as it moves from one problem to another. We may well wonder if this does not undermine the divine origins of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its relevance for every generation. Hick makes much of the uniqueness of the contemporary situation. He writes as if the problems of pluralism were entirely unknown in earlier generations. There may be some truth in Hick's analysis of the modern world. We need however to look at the history of pluralism at a time before Hick however came 'to live in the multi-cultural, multi-coloured and multi-faith city of Birmingham'.⁴

We can, in fact, go back into the world of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. In the Old Testament, there is a continuing conflict between God and the gods.⁵ The peoples of the Ancient Near East could accept and worship as many extra deities as their needs demanded. Within this pluralist context, the Old Testament proclaims God not as one among many but as the God who is incomparable—the God in whose sight the 'gods' are nothing.⁶ In the New Testament, we find Paul preaching in Athens, a 'city... full of idols'.⁷ When Paul preached Christ 'perhaps... (the Athenians) were astonished that anyone would want to bring still more gods to Athens, god capital of the world! Athenians, after all must have needed something like the Yellow Pages just to keep tabs on the many deities already represented in their city!'⁸

From the Old and New Testament Scriptures, we discover that pluralism is nothing new. The people of God in biblical times could not avoid the fact of pluralism. They did not, however, succumb to its pressures. Hick's reaction is very different. Pluralism for him is the norm to which the Christian message is expected to conform. A Christ-centred message is not congenial to modern pluralist society. So the Christian message must be adjusted in order that

⁴ *ibid* viii.

⁵ A helpful exposition of this theme may be found in A. König, *Here Am I: Believer's Reflection on God* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, London 1982) pp. 2-13.

⁶ cf Isa. 41:24.

⁷ Acts 17:16.

⁸ Don Richardson *Eternity in their Hearts* (Regal Books Ventura California 1981) pp. 23.

it can be fitted more readily into the contemporary outlook. For Hick, the pluralist context has become the pretext for treating the biblical text lightly and for producing a theology which no longer accords the central place to Christ.

A Demythologized Christianity

Hick assumes that the only viable interpretation of Christianity will be a thoroughly demythologized one. 'Christian theology has long recognised the presence and function of myth in the scriptures ... and has long been concerned to couch the Christian message in ways that are intelligible to the demythologized modern mind.'⁹ Although Hick may take demythologization for granted, we must point out the importance Scripture attaches to historical truth—for example, 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'¹⁰ Again Paul declares that Jesus Christ has been 'designated Son of God in power ... by his resurrection from the dead'.¹¹ Hick, however, will not think of Christ in this way. Commenting on the direct connection between demythologizing and pluralism in Hick's thought, James Cook writes: 'For Hick the unique character and claim of traditional Christianity are obstacles in the way of attaining "a global religious vision" to which he feels Christians are being called ... When proper deference has been paid to John Hick's statement that *The Myth of God Incarnate* needed to be written because of the growing knowledge of Christian origins, one suspects that a motive at least as strong is the opinion that Christianity must surrender the uniqueness of the incarnation in order to make peace with other world religions.'¹²

In order to understand the significance of this 'global religious vision', we should appreciate how deeply committed Hick is to both demythologizing and pluralism. Hick is not one of those theologians whose definition of 'myth' is so ambiguous as to leave us wondering how seriously he takes the whole process of demythologizing. Here is how he defines myth: 'A myth is a story which is told but which is not literally true or an idea or image which is applied to something or someone but which does not literally apply, but which invites a particular attitude in its hearers.'¹³ He proceeds to describe 'the truth of a myth' as 'a kind of practical truth consisting in the appropriateness of the attitude it evokes'.¹⁴ By speaking of this 'kind of prac-

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tical truth', Hick tries to look behind 'the incarnational mythology to the religious experience which it expresses'.¹⁵ In this way, he seeks to discover a 'quality of psychological absoluteness' in the 'incarnational mythology'. In other words, he emphasizes the believer's personal testimony—this is true for me—as distinct from the authoritarian demand that Christianity be presented as an absolute truth for the adherents of other religions as well as for Christians.

⁹ *God and the Universe of Faiths* p. 104.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 15:17.

¹¹ Rom. 1:4.

¹² 'God Incarnate: Myth or Truth?' *Reformed Review*. (Winter 1979), Vol 32 2 pp. 71, 74.

¹³ *God and the Universe of Faiths* p. 166.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 167.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 173.

This view of practical truth is very different from that of the New Testament, which refuses to dissociate practical from historical truth. According to the apostle Paul, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then all who believe and preach the Christian gospel are in error.¹⁶ Take away the historical truth of Jesus Christ, and we are left not with practical truth, but with an illusion.

Hick relates the incarnational mythology to pluralism by suggesting that we have not properly understood the 'Christian myth of incarnation if we take it to mean an exclusive claim for Christianity as the only way of salvation'.¹⁷ Hick's pluralist theology makes a radical contrast with the views of Lesslie Newbigin, who distinguishes between cultural pluralism and religious pluralism. 'Cultural pluralism I take to be the attitude which welcomes the variety of different cultures and lifestyles within one society and believes that this is an enrichment of human life ... Religious pluralism, on the other hand, is the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth: that to speak of religious beliefs as true and false is inadmissible.'¹⁸ Hick would not allow such a distinction. According to Hick, '(I)t is not appropriate to speak of a religion as being true or false, any more than it is to speak of a civilisation as being true or false.' In line with this, Hick describes religions as 'distinguishable religio-cultural streams within man's history, (which) are expressions of the diversities of human types and temperaments and thought forms'.¹⁹ In Hick's view, cultural pluralism and religious pluralism are inseparable. From his radically pluralist perspective Hick writes, 'I now no longer find it possible to proceed as a Christian theologian as though Christianity were the only religion in the world. Surely our thinking must be undertaken, in the "one world" of today and tomorrow, on a more open and global basis.'²⁰ Hence Hick 'seeks to develop a Christian theology of religions which takes the decisive step from ... a ... one's-own-religion centred to ... a God-centred view of the religious life of mankind'.²¹

This contrast is presented with a view to developing a 'global religious vision'. This approach is open to question on two counts. First we must call in question the idea that a Christ-centred view is neither God-centred nor global in its vision. Christians are convinced that salvation has its origin in the God who so loved the world as to give his only Son.²² When we keep Christ at the centre of our theology, we honour God and his global concern for man's salvation.

Second, we must challenge the view of God contained in Hick's 'global religious vision'. According to Hick, 'a revelation of the divine reality to mankind ... had to be a pluriform revelation, a series of revealing experiences occurring independently within the different streams of human history'.²³ What kind of 'God' does this suggest? Does Hick not leave us with a 'God' who can be conceived in whatever way we choose? To pursue Hick's global religious vision is, in effect, to abandon the search for truth. Is that a price worth paying?

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 15:17.

¹⁷ *God and the Universe of Faiths* p. 172.

¹⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, London, 1989) p. 14.

¹⁹ *God and the Universe of Faiths* p. 102.

²⁰ *ibid.* viii.

²¹ *ibid.* viii-ix.

²² Jn. 3:16.

²³ *God and the Universe of Faiths* p. 136-7.

If, in view of his radically pluralist theology, Hick is still to be regarded as, in any sense, a Christian theologian, it can be only in the sense that he belongs to a Christian religio-culture tradition. He was born and brought up in a society shaped by Christianity. Any attempt on Hick's part to continue to speak of salvation must face the criticism that, 'in this total relativism, we have no ground for speaking of salvation at all'. Hick's discovery of a 'quality of psychological absoluteness' (that is, truth for me) would appear to be nothing more than sheer pragmatism. He does not wish to be burdened with a theological absolute, which must be imposed on adherents of all religions. Nevertheless, conscious of the need for an absolute, he clings to this notion of 'psychological absoluteness'.

Cut loose from the historical foundations of the Christian faith, Hick's theology offers no alternative but a leap, which bypasses history and moves from a rather contentless 'divine transcendent' to 'man's religious awareness'. He stresses the importance of 'the construction of theologies (in the plural) based upon the full range of man's religious awareness'.²⁴ The adequacy of this preoccupation with experience has been questioned by Newbigin—'Anyone who is familiar with the religious literature of the world knows that the religious experiences of the biblical writers are not unique. There is a large amount of devotional literature in the worlds of Hinduism and Islam which can be used without incongruity by a Christian. What is unique about the Bible is the story which it tells, with its climax in the story of the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of the Son of God. If that story is true, then it is unique and also universal in its implications for all human history.'²⁵ However much we may value the religious experiences associated with the other religions, we, who take seriously the biblical story, must affirm that the way between the divine transcendent and man's experience, the true and living way, is Jesus Christ.

When the focus of attention is on man's experience rather than Jesus Christ, theology becomes more of a

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description of pluralist society than a proclamation of the gospel. With Hick's account of Christian beliefs, we find that theological affirmation is swallowed up by sociological observation. Emphasizing that 'Christian beliefs consist in the beliefs of Christians', he stresses the variety of beliefs held by Christians. It is this which, according to Hick, must be 'the starting-point for our inquiry into the relationship between Christianity and the other religions of the world'.²⁶ If Christians hold such a variety of beliefs, it follows that 'the Christians of one age cannot legislate for the Christians of another age'. In effect, as a modern pluralist, Hick is trying to retain the name 'Christian', while dissociating himself from historic Christian beliefs.

Hick's demythologized, pluralist theology is presented as an authentic expression of Christianity. In taking his own version of Christianity as the starting-point for dialogue with other religions, Hick contemptuously dismisses those who would honour the Scriptures and stand by the faith once for all delivered to the saints 'Christianity will—we may hope—outgrow its theological fundamentalism, its literal interpretation of the idea of

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 103.

²⁵ L. Newbigin, *op. cit.* 97.

²⁶ *God and the Universe of Faiths* p. 119.

incarnation, as it has largely outgrown its biblical fundamentalism.²⁷ Or again, 'The doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity may turn out to be part of the intellectual construction which has to be left behind when the disciple of Jesus discards the cultural packaging in which Christianity has wrapped the gospel.'²⁸ However confident Hick is about his version of Christianity the question remains whether, in fact, his view is a denial rather than an interpretation of the gospel.

Once we have seen what Hick proposes to leave behind, we may wonder where he would take us from here. Hick writes, 'the future influence of Jesus may well lie more outside the church than within it, as a "man of universal destiny" whose teaching and example will become common property of the world, entering variously into all its major religions and also secular traditions.'²⁹

Without speculating about Hick's view of the whole range of ideas and practices which are collectively described as the New Age Movement, we may note a general similarity between Hick's theology and New Age teaching. If this Movement has been shown to depart radically from biblical theology, a similar criticism may be levelled at Hick. Does he not present us with a deviation from rather than a variation of Christianity?

In stressing the importance of dialogue between the various world religions, Hick contrasts dialogue and confrontation. 'The dialogue between these who accept and value religious diversity is quite different from the older kind of confrontation in which each group was concerned to establish the unique superiority of its own tradition.'³⁰ While true dialogue must always be more than a monologue in which both sides speak at each other rather than to each other, we must not overemphasize the contrast between dialogue and confrontation. The Communist writer, Milan Machovec has made this point well. 'We do not want half-baked believers in dialogue: we want to confront real Christians.'³¹ Authentic encounter is the way to fruitful dialogue.

This is the approach which has been emphasized by Stephen Neil. He seeks to enter into the heart and spirit of other religious without disloyalty to his own. He asserts, 'It is those who have the deepest and most confident faith themselves who have the courage to launch out on this adventure of the human spirit.' He insists that 'dialogue does not involve indifference to truth or the abandonment of all objective criteria of judgement'.³² A deep and confident faith is not the same as 'self-assertion' which 'is always a sign of lack of inner confidence'.³³ Neil maintains, 'the Christian cannot compromise. Nevertheless, his approach to other forms of human faith must be marked by the deepest humility.'³⁴ The contrast between Neill and Hick is striking. Neill writes, 'There are certain basic convictions which must be maintained, if Christianity is to be recognisably Christian.'³⁵ These convictions include—'The Christian faith may learn much from other faiths: but it is universal in its claims: in the end Christ must

²⁷ *God Has Many Names* p. 78.

²⁸ *ibid* p. 67.

²⁹ *ibid* p. 78.

³⁰ J. Hick and H. Askari ed. *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (Gower, Aldershot 1985) p. 4.

³¹ quoted in G.C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, p. 188.

³² S. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*. (OP, 2nd edition, 1969) p. 5.

³³ *ibid*. p. 19.

³⁴ *ibid*. p. 18.

³⁵ *ibid*. p. 231.

be acknowledged as Lord of all.³⁶ In the light of this understanding of dialogue, representatives of other religions may not readily assume that Hick's theology is an authentic expression of Christian faith.

Hick's Universalism

We have paid considerable attention to the way in which Hick demythologizes the Christian faith and removes Christ from the centre of divine revelation. We now turn our attention to his view 'any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures'. In the context of Hick's pluralist theology, demythologizing and universalism are closely related. Nevertheless, they are distinguishable. Pluralism, demythologizing and universalism may all be present in Hick's theology, but it does not follow that they always belong together. There are some who feel a strong pull towards universalism without being attracted to a demythologized version of Christianity or a pluralist interpretation of the Christian faith.

Despite Hick's boldness in asserting that theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures, there are important questions to be asked. Can we simply assume that there is no life-and-death decision to be made? Can we relax the urgency with which the gospel calls for faith in Jesus Christ? Can we

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assume that everything will turn out well for everyone in the end? Universalism may be highly appealing to modern man, but is it biblical? Can we really accept universalism without loosening our commitment to the authority of Scripture? These questions demand answers: They cannot be lightly dismissed.

Hick's view of mankind's salvation stands in stark contrast to the answer given by Jesus Christ to the question, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' Jesus gave this reply: 'Strive to enter by the narrow door: for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'³⁷ Those who are drawn to Hick's position must face the fact that the adoption of such a viewpoint will mean disregarding the teaching of Jesus Christ. Whatever Hick may claim for himself, we must ask whether any theology which so easily dismisses the teaching of Jesus Christ can ever be considered as a 'viable Christian' point of view.

According to Hick, 'every one will be saved'. In Paul's letter to the Romans we find the words 'every one ... will be saved' *with the addition of a very significant phrase*—'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'³⁸ There is a universality in the New Testament gospel, but it is very different from the kind of universalism boldly proclaimed by John Hick. There is, in God, a universality of love. His love is directed toward the whole world—'God so loved the world'. This love is directed toward but does not guarantee the salvation of the whole world. In reacting against Hick's universalism, we must not lose sight of this universality of the gospel. In John's gospel, we read, 'God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.'³⁹ Both Paul and

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 232.

³⁷ Lk. 13:23-24.

³⁸ Rom. 10:13.

³⁹ Jn. 3:17.

Peter stress the universality of the gospel's saving intent. Paul emphasizes that 'God desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth'.⁴⁰ Peter affirms that the Lord does not wish 'that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance'.⁴¹ This universality of the gospel does not, however, lead to Hick's kind of universalism. While Hick tells us that 'any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures', the New Testament is not at all uncomfortable with setting the universality of divine love and the fact of judgement side by side. Following the great declarations of divine love in John 3:16-17, we have these solemn words of judgement—'he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the only Son of God'.⁴²

Hick urges us to choose the love of God rather than the judgement of God. The New Testament does not, however, present love and judgement as mutually exclusive alternatives. We are told, on the one hand, that God loves the world. Alongside this is placed the fact of judgement. Through unbelief, man brings himself under judgement. In the New Testament gospel, there are two strands which must be held together. In God, there is a universality of a love, a love which is directed towards the world's salvation. Out of the divine heart of love comes a call for the response of faith in Jesus Christ. Hick's 'must'—the love of God 'must' lead to 'the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures' is not found in the New Testament. When Hick exhorts us to take the love of God more seriously, we must respond by asking the question—Does this not mean that we must also take the call for faith in Jesus Christ more seriously? When Scripture speaks of salvation, it speaks of both the love of God which provides salvation and the faith in Christ which receives salvation. Scripture speaks of grace in connection with faith, and not in isolation from it. The gospel does not say, 'By grace you have been saved apart from faith or without faith.' The gospel emphasizes both grace and faith—'By grace you have been saved through faith'.⁴³

Conclusion

However unpopular it may be in the contemporary theological climate, the conservative evangelical, with his commitment to the norm of Scripture, must seriously raise the question—Is this view biblical? When, for example, Hick boldly declares that 'Christianity ... has abundant resources which are capable of being developed in the interests of a world ecumenism', we must question both his concept of 'Christianity' and his object of 'a world ecumenism', as a biblical goal.⁴⁴ When we examine Hick's theology, it is clear that he shows much less respect for Scripture than for the pluralist environment of contemporary society. In criticizing 'half-way house' views such as Rahner's notion of 'anonymous Christianity', he writes, 'These rather critical theories are all attempts to square an inadequate theology with the facts of God's world'.⁴⁵ We can, of course, turn this question round—how convincing is Hick's attempt to square his view with the teaching of God's Word? Hick's use of Scripture is extremely selective. He picks those parts which are convenient for his purpose, and discards those which he does not find useful. He speaks of the Johannine rewriting of Christ's teaching.⁴⁶ This cavalier approach to Scripture must be questioned. Is it not Hick himself who

⁴⁰ 1 Tim. 2:3-4.

⁴¹ 2 Pet. 3:9.

⁴² Jn. 3:18.

⁴³ Eph. 2:8.

⁴⁴ Hick, *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ *God Has Many Names*, p. 74.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 69.

is re-writing Jesus' teaching? Hick prefers the Synoptics to John. Even this creates problems for him. In the Synoptics, as well as in John's Gospel, Hick finds passages which simply have to be dismissed if his view of Christianity is to be maintained. Any similarity which remains between Hick's version of Christianity and the biblical presentation of the gospel is purely coincidental. Clearly, Hick does not take Scripture at all seriously. The theological norm for Hick is not Scripture but the modern pluralist outlook. Wherever

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Hick does touch on biblical exegesis—and this does not happen very often—it is with the intention of arguing himself and others out of any serious attachment to a biblically-based faith.

When we consider Hick's notion of 'world ecumenism', we must understand that his idea of ecumenism is very different from that associated with the World Council of Churches—'The W.C.C. is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Hick will have none of this. His 'world ecumenism' is not concerned with a 'fellowship of churches', united around incarnational and Trinitarian doctrine. Hick's ecumenism would entirely dispense with the call for world evangelism. In responding to Hick's idea of world ecumenism, we may say with Newbigin—'It is indeed the duty of Christians in multi-faith societies to cooperate with people of other faiths in seeking a just ordering to society, but this is in no sense a substitute for the missionary preaching of the Church.'⁴⁷

I began by saying that the conservative evangelical may benefit from Hick's frankness. With the clear statement of his position, Hick challenges us to present more clearly and convincingly the biblical alternative to his pluralistic theology. Dissatisfied with Hick's version of Christianity and his notion of world ecumenism, we must seek to be more effective in our presentation of the better way—commitment to the authority of God's Word and obedience to the call for world evangelism.

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⁴⁷ L. Newbigin, op. cit. p. 158.