

REVIEW OF *AN INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION* BY JOHN HICK

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Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Biography

John Hick (1922-2012) was a philosopher and theologian, with a D.Phil from Oxford University and a D.Litt from the University of Edinburgh. He wrote over twenty books and held various teaching positions at Birmingham University and Claremont Graduate University, and he was the Vice-President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion and of the World Congress of Faiths.¹ While he began his career as an apologist for orthodox Christianity, he is most known for his pluralist views on religion.²

Summary

The purpose of this book is to develop a “field theory of religion from a religious point of view” (xiii). For Hick, the only way to do this well is to learn from those of faiths unlike one’s own (xiii). His hypothesis begins with “the religious ambiguity of the universe.” By ambiguity he doesn’t mean uncertainty but the ability to make sense of everything from either a religious or naturalistic perspective (xvii, cf. 12-13). This is a theme that is important throughout the book. As he explains, if his “pluralistic hypothesis holds, [then] religious experience is always *culturally* conditioned, [and] it is not surprising that it takes different forms within the different traditions” (xviii, emphasis added). He adapts Kant’s noumenal reality and phenomenal appearances concepts (xix) to understand how all religions can harmonize around “the Real” (xxi, 10-11), or the God behind the God—a concept he’ll progressively develop throughout the book. Another important thought he will develop is the mythological (or metaphorical) view of historical and literal points within various religions. This helps remove the existing contradictions (cf. xxxvff).

The book is divided into five parts: The first covers religious observations and experiences, focusing mostly on soteriological and eschatological features of the main world religions. The second part looks at *why* he believes the universe is “religiously ambiguous.” The third part is both his longest and most abstract. Here he discusses the nature of meaning as well as other concepts that he will use again in his last two parts. In the fourth part his “pluralistic hypothesis” is finally fleshed out. And lastly, part five deals with various repercussions and conclusions from his hypothesis.

Beginning in part one, Hick looks first at the soteriological component of religion in general. As this obviously varies by religion, he describes this very broadly as the “fruit” of its adherents (xxvi). This allows him to speak collectively of the soteriology of *all* religions without having to get into specifics. The “fruit” of salvation (or “liberation,” as he sometimes calls it) is the “transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” (36). To explain this, he uses an axial model of understanding religious development. The axial period spanned, very loosely, from 800 BCE to CE 200 (29). This is the time when the major world

¹ <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite>, accessed September 17, 2022.

² Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 159.

religions began congealing into what they are today by establishing their major doctrines about “the ultimate” (30-31). Before this, pre-axial religion was mostly concerned with “preservation of cosmic and social order.” Think, tribal orientations, etc. However, after the axial period (post-axial), which is also the time we live in today, religion became “concerned with the question for salvation or liberation” (22). This is built on what is called “cosmic optimism,” a theme found in both eastern and western religions. It is the idea that the life to come will be better than the one we have today (56).

In part two, Hick walks through the “religious ambiguity” of the universe (73). He begins with the ontological argument, cosmological arguments, and “contemporary scientific theism” (the teleological argument). For the ontological argument, he spends most of this time with Plantinga, concluding that his version, based on possible worlds, is “fallacious” (77). To Hick, using a maximally evil being in place of a maximally good one breaks the whole thing (78). While he spends very little time with cosmological arguments, Hick ultimately concludes that one can either be persuaded by them, or simply “accept the universe as a sheer unexplained fact” (80). Dealing with arguments from design (mostly in aggregate), Hick seems more convinced of their strength, but ultimately concludes that “there is indeed no way in which [a universe like ours] can be strictly incompatible” with *either* theism or naturalism (86). This then takes Hick to the anthropic principle—the idea that the universe can be explained. Of the brief time he spends here, most is generally in support of a religious perspective. But, ultimately, he concludes, the naturalist’s perspective is still justified (94).

From here, he shifts to moral arguments, religious experience, and probability. Morality, Hick says, is “a function of our human nature” (97). Morality can be understood either as a result of creation (the religious view), or as a necessity of successful societies (the naturalist). Next, Hick discusses the *collective* “religious experience” (99). For this, he only uses examples from the New and Old Testaments, but works to show that the modern mind *can* believe in the more fantastical elements (e.g. Israel’s exodus from Egypt and Jesus’ resurrection) as “foundational myth” which results in “an appropriate response of trust in God” (100). And while he does admit critical study of the NT documents has “opened up other possibilities” (101), naturalistic interpretations are still reasonable (102). As for probability, he engages with Swinburne’s use of Bayes’ Theorem, which attempts to show that God is more likely than not. But this kind of argument “has no force because we lack the quantitative data needed” (109). He gives the last word of part two to the naturalistic option, beginning by acknowledging that “no naturalistic theory can account for the *existence* of the universe” (111, emphasis original). Despite the leeway Hick has given to the naturalistic explanations, they are still dependent “upon a prior naturalistic conviction” (114). But the reality of evil seems to push the pendulum back in the other direction (118). In conclusion, an uncreated creator and a rational, intelligible universe both point toward a “theistic world-view,” but things like evil and the sufficiency of naturalistic explanations provide a notable counterbalance (122-123).

In part three, Hick uses chapters eight, nine, and ten to flesh out the concept of meaning, before turning to look at the justification for religious belief (and meaning). Meaning itself, says Hick, is fundamentally about community and environment and how we understand ideas and objects in relation to this (131). Hick connects this definition of meaning with the transcendent. “For meaning is always couched at least partly in terms that exceed the immediately given” (136). Both of these concepts—the social and interpersonal, as well as a connection to the

transcendent—are part of our nature as humans (151). This then leads to the place of faith. Regardless of how warranted it is, faith is the “inner virtue of the heart,” (159) and its “interpretive responses [are how] we are conscious of the Real” (160). It is within the Real, then, that we find our ultimate grounding in reality (161-162).

Turning to chapter eleven, Hick begins shifting his argument more directly to his “pluralistic hypothesis,” borrowing the epistemological terms of realism and non-realism, where realism signifies material objects that exist independent of us (172). This comes into play when considering something like the eschaton. Life after death (i.e. heaven and its white-robed choirs) may not look at all like what one anticipates, but that is okay. Because “even though falsified in all of its details, [it] will nevertheless have been confirmed in its main substance,” which is to say, there will be *something* blissful following death (180). Concluding part three, Hick argues it is most “rational to believe in the reality of God” (211), though, as an important caveat, “the reference is to the rationality of believing, not of what is believed” (212). At this point he begins to tease out what constitutes this rationality. When considering indirect modes, such as testimony or Scripture, it is only rational for us to accept it if it coheres with our existing beliefs and experiences (219).

Part four turns now to the central focus of *An Interpretation of Religion*. After rejecting both naturalism and exclusivism, Hick opts for a “third possibility that the great post-axial faiths [each] constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (235-236). Put plainly, each major religion “embody different perceptions” of the Real (240). His “chief philosophical resource” in coming to this conclusion is Kant’s concept (from *Critique of Pure Reason*) that our minds interpret the world around us in ways already familiar to us (240). As such, we have levels with which we can understand the Real: the Real *an sich* and the Real *personae/impersonae* (242). The Real *an sich* is the unknowable and indescribable version, while the *personae* (divine) and *impersonae* (metaphysical) are, respectively, the various deities of religions (266) and the “non-personal ultimates” of eastern religions (278). The Real *an sich* is a presupposition (243) necessary to harmonize the various *personae* and *impersonae*, each of which have (conflicting) claims upon “the Ultimate” (249). As to the *personae*, says Hick, the various gods are “both idealized projections of the character of those worshippers *and* manifestations of the Real” (266, emphasis original). Similarly, for the *impersonae* side of things, the different “modes of experience” are “ways in which the Real becomes manifest to a human consciousness” (284).

In Hick’s final part, he deals primarily with soteriology, ethics, and several unanswered questions. “The function of post-axial religion,” he writes, “is to create contexts within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness can take place” (300). This is his definition of salvation. Interestingly, this can occur even in areligious social movements like Marxism (306). The effectiveness then of this soteriology, or transformation, becomes the “basic criterion” for judging the ethics of various religions (309). Specifically, it is assessed by how well one adheres to the “Golden Rule” (treating others the way you want to be treated) (316). Considering a wider implication of ethics, for an example, he compares Christianity with Islam. Jesus’ teachings were personal, while Mohammad’s were corporate. But as each grew, they had to ‘swap places’ and grow into the ideals of the other, and so Christianity had to adopt corporate ethics and Islam personal ones (331-336). Broadening his view again to all religions, he concludes that “each is an [sic] unique mixture of good and evil,”

with none being morally superior or above the rest (337). Wrapping up, Hick addresses a few questions he has not yet discussed. For example, when describing the Real *an sich*, which, by definition cannot be described, the best we can do is refer to it as “the ultimate mystery” (349), though, at the same time, “we live inescapably in relation to it” (351). As to the questions Where do we come from? Why are we here? and Where are we going? we have two options in front of us. We can interpret them literally. But this will result in conflicts, as each religion answers these questions differently (359). Or, we can interpret them mythologically (356). This will allow us to create a harmonious picture. Additionally, instead of comparing religions to see which answers these questions best, we should instead look at the theme the questions are highlighting. He references the problem of evil as an example. The conclusion then is something along the lines of: pain is real, yes (359), but some kind of eschatological hope is still present (360). This leads into his final chapter which deals with conflicting truth claims. By and large, conflicts are a result of reading literally instead of finding “mythological interpretation” (370). In his epilogue, one of the largest threats to religious pluralism is religious fundamentalism (377). And, as it relates to Christianity in particular, “the tension comes rather at the level of the emotion and the imagination” (379).

Critique

In *An Interpretation of Religion*, John Hick has written a lot, covering a tremendous amount of ground. A good bit of that he’s done by retaining jargon and awkward constructions most common to the respective fields he touches on. It’s clear he has both a broad and deep understanding of many fields. Given the breadth of this work, this critique will be limited to only a few major problems: (1) why?; (2) the problem of his modernist/elitist perspective; (3) his misunderstanding of Christianity; and (4) the missing patch for his hypothesis.

If the Real is in fact *real*, then why would he/she/it/they have allowed so much confusion and division among the different *personae* and *inpersonae* manifestations? Instead of dealing with the problem of evil (something Hick gives a few pages to), this presents a brand-new problem, the problem of the un-real. In other words, if the Real is in fact real, then where is the proof? Of course, this problem will always be unsolvable, because the Real is, by definition, inaccessible and unknowable. But why exactly *is* the Real inaccessible? And, to that end, why do we need the Real at all? If we took away Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, would there be anything left for the Real to do?

In part two, Hick is quite charitable to naturalism. Even when the cases he presents favor a religious view, he never quite seems to be able to conclude that naturalism unwarranted. This idea becomes more interesting when combined with his overall hypothesis: his pluralistic model understands, not only the *world* better than the major world religions do, but it understands the actual religions themselves better than they do (because they continue to “emphasize the ever-present possibility of delusion” (168)). When discussing truth claims that conflict with the Real (e.g. the Hebrew concept of ‘God Almighty,’ 261), he concludes that questions that cannot be determined by “human experience belong to the province of the intellect engaging in metaphysical speculation,” which is different from religious experience (262). So, to properly interpret truth claims such as these, they must be passed through the filter of the “intellect engaging in metaphysical speculation.” And since ‘God Almighty’ is already a metaphysical

claim, what Hick is saying is that anything we cannot understand through personal experience gets elevated to human judgment. How is this not modernism under a new skin? When discussing Jesus' resurrection, he quickly passes by it, lumping it into other conflicting truth claims, claiming that only "by unbiased assessment of the historical evidence" can we get to the truth. But, unfortunately, those methods have "generally proven elusive" (364). For all the exhaustive research Hick has done, he seems to have neglected some of the most basic bits.

This leads into the third major problem with *Interpretation*. In criticizing the ethics of Christianity, Hick writes:

The love commandment of the Sermon on the Mount by itself, without the insistent promptings of humanist and rationalist voices, did not end slavery and has not ended exploitation. Nor did it even, by itself, bring the perception that freedom and equality are ideals to be sought after (330).

This is similar to how some adherents to eastern religions can view all Americans as being Christians simply by virtue of their nationality. But unlike many other religions, what makes a person a Christian is their willingness to give up their old life and follow Jesus in his new way. It's not given by birth to all, but is instead received during life only by some. For all of Hick's in-depth knowledge of Christianity, he seems to have misunderstood this basic principle. Instead of tracing history, looking at the power dynamics that began to develop after Constantine, and then concluding that many claiming Christianity were actually far from Christ, he just lumps everyone in together. For an outside observer, this is understandable. But for one who began his career defending orthodoxy, it is not.

Continuing on with a similar line of reasoning, Hick attempts to show that all religions, given enough time, essentially resolve to incorporate similar ethics. He uses Christianity and Islam to illustrate. But he (again) misunderstands what the essence of Christianity is, thinking of it instead as a nation or organized people group, more like an Islamic country. He shows how Christianity begins with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and eventually became the bloodthirsty and politically driven church-state that tolerated slavery amongst other evils. In a symmetrical way, Islam started out violent but developed Sermon-on-the-Mount-like teachings (he's referring to the mystical Sufi branches, which are not common within Islam). The problem is, it is a false comparison. Islam today, in its violent and conquering form is not inconsistent with its origins. Neither is its peaceful forms inconsistent. However, the 'Christian' acting un-Christlike, be it then or now, is aberrant. Matthew, Mark, and John all warn about leaders taking these forms. They're called antichrists.

When taken all together, Hick's pluralist hypothesis depends on a certain level of harmony among religions. After all, behind each religion (*personae* or *impersonae*) is the unknowable but still-there Real *an sich*. So, what does he do when actual fundamental conflicts arise? He reinterprets them into a kind of "mythical" fuzziness that no longer presents any conflicts. One might take that further and say this reinterpretation no longer presents any interesting distinctives at all. For example, Christianity's claims to the virgin birth, bodily resurrection, ascension, and atonement (all examples Hick cites, 371) should *not* be understood literally. How exactly should they be understood? He does not say. Instead of answering that question, he pivots to explain that these kind of exclusivist beliefs result in economic

exploitation and political domination (371-372). If this were politics, we would call that a diversion. “Thus, whereas understood literally the doctrine of a unique divine incarnation in Christ has divided humanity and has shrunk the image of God” (372). How Hick can write these words and retain an intellectually honest perspective is unclear. As mentioned above, he appears to have turned a blind eye to Christianity in order to better stuff it into the form his pluralistic hypothesis needs it to be.

In conclusion, Hick’s hypothesis comes very close to Mahayana Buddhism, a claim he acknowledges himself (291-292). The main difference is that, mystically, the Real can be perceived in Buddhism, while it cannot be in Hick’s system. (In addition to this difference, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis desires to synthesize *all* religions. But it is debatable as to whether or not the form of Buddhism he’s following is already trying to do this). But beyond these differences, what he is describing, to his own admission, is very much a form of Mahayana Buddhism. So then, after all these words—and contra to the very title of his book—has Hick not just described an exclusive version of a long established form of Buddhism?

Questions

- 1) Do you agree that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is a form of Buddhism?
- 2) Per Hick, some religions have post-positions (e.g. post-Christianity), while others don’t yet (e.g. post-Buddhism). Do you think this is accurate? And do you think this provides an apologetic angle (i.e. being able to potentially see where some major religions may be heading)?
- 3) For someone who believes that the Real is a sufficient “ground” (252) for understanding the world, morality, and human value, does the Imago Dei (specifically, our longing to worship) provide a better apologetic?
- 4) Has Hick set up an unfalsifiable system?
- 5) Do you think Hick ignores scholarship on the resurrection? Or is he legitimately ignorant? In other words, is there a benefit-of-the-doubt case here to give him?