



Mackay, Murdo John Norman (2016) *A critical study of John Hick's religious pluralism*. MTh(R) thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/7659/>

Copyright and moral rights for this thesis are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Glasgow Theses Service  
<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/>  
theses@gla.ac.uk

*A Critical Study of John Hick's Religious Pluralism*

*Murdo John Norman Mackay*

*M.A., B.D., Dip. Th., Pg. Dip.*

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the Degree of M.Th.

Edinburgh Theological Seminary

validated by

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

*October 2016*

© Murdo John Norman Mackay 2016

### *Abstract*

This study examines the pluralistic hypothesis advanced by the late Professor John Hick viz. that all religious faiths provide equally salvific pathways to God, irrespective of their theological and doctrinal differences. The central focus of the study is a critical examination of (a) the epistemology of religious experience as advanced by Professor Hick, (b) the ontological status of the being he understands to be God, and further asks (c) to what extent can the pluralistic view of religious experience be harmonised with the experience with which the Christian life is understood to begin viz. regeneration.

Tracing the theological journey of Professor Hick from fundamentalist Christian to religious pluralist, the study notes the reasons given for Hick's gradual disengagement from the Christian faith. In addition to his belief that the pre-scientific worldview of the Bible was obsolete and passé, Hick took the view that modern biblical scholarship could not accommodate traditionally held Christian beliefs. He conceded that the Incarnation, if true, would be decisive evidence for the uniqueness of Christianity, but rejected the same on the grounds of logical incoherence. This study affirms the view that the doctrine of the Incarnation occupies a place of crucial importance within world religion, but rejects the claim of incoherence.

Professor Hick believed that God's Spirit was at work in all religions, producing a common religious experience, or spiritual awakening to God. The soteriological dimension of this spiritual awakening, he suggests, finds expression as the worshipper turns away from self-centredness to the giving of themselves to God and others. At the level of epistemology he further argued that religious experience itself provided the rational basis for belief in God.

The study supports the assertion by Professor Hick that religious experience itself ought to be trusted as a source of knowledge and this on the *principle of credulity*, which states that a person's claim to perceive or experience something is *prima facie* justified, unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary. Hick's argument has been extensively developed and defended by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Alston. This confirms the importance of Hick's contribution to the philosophy of religion, and further establishes his reputation within the field as an original thinker.

It is recognised in this thesis, however, that in affirming only the rationality of belief, but not the obligation to believe, Professor Hick's epistemology is not fully consistent with a Christian theology of revelation. Christian theology views the created order as pre-interpreted and unambiguous in its testimony to God's existence. To disbelieve in God's existence is to violate one's epistemic duty by suppressing the truth.

Professor Hick's critical realist principle, which he regards as the key to understanding what is happening in the different forms of religious experience, is examined within this thesis. According to the critical realist principle, there are realities external to us, yet we are never aware of them as they are in themselves, but only as they appear to us within our particular cognitive machinery and conceptual resources. All awareness of God is interpreted through the lens of pre-existing, culturally relative religious forms, which in turn explains the differing theologies within the world of religion. The critical realist principle views God as unknowable, in the sense that his inner nature is beyond the reach of human conceptual categories and linguistic systems. Professor Hick thus endorses and develops the view of God as ineffable, but employs the term *transcategorical* when speaking of God's ineffability.

The study takes the view that the notion of *transcategoriality* as developed by Professor Hick appears to deny any ontological status to God, effectively arguing him out of existence. Furthermore, in attributing the notion of *transcategoriality* to God, Professor Hick would appear to render incoherent his own fundamental assertion that we can know nothing of God that is either true or false.

The claim that the experience of regeneration with which the Christian life begins can be classed as a mere species of the genus common throughout all faiths, is rejected within this thesis. Instead it is argued that Christian regeneration is a distinctive experience that cannot be reduced to a salvific experience, defined merely as an awareness of, or awakening to, God, followed by a turning away from self to others.

Professor Hick argued against any notion that the Christian community was the social grouping through which God's Spirit was working in an exclusively redemptive manner. He supported his view by drawing attention to (a) the presence, at times, of comparable or higher levels of morality in world religion, when contrasted with that evidenced by the followers of Christ, and (b) the presence, at times, of demonstrably lower levels of morality in the followers of Christ, when contrasted with the lives of other religious devotees.

These observations are fully supported, but the conclusion reached is rejected, on the grounds that according to Christian theology the saving work of God's Spirit is evidenced in a life that is changing from what it was before. Christian theology does not suggest or demand that such lives at every stage be demonstrably superior, when contrasted with other virtuous or morally upright members of society.

The study concludes by paying tribute to the contribution Professor Hick has made to the field of the epistemology of religious experience.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	8
Chapter 1: John Hick's Spiritual and Theological Journey to Religious Pluralism .....	9
1.1 Introduction.....	9
1.2 Early Christian Influences .....	11
1.3 Disengagement from Fundamentalist Christianity .....	16
1.4 Philosopher of Religion .....	17
1.5 The Structure of Faith.....	19
1.6 Theological Controversy.....	25
1.7 A Christian Theodicy.....	25
1.8 Inter-Faith Dialogue .....	26
1.9 A Copernican Shift in Theology .....	28
1.10 The Myth of God Incarnate .....	36
1.11 An Interpretation of Religion .....	41
1.12 Later Years .....	45
Chapter 2: Epistemology of Religious Experience .....	48
2.1 The Problem of Definition .....	48
2.2 The Rationality of Religious Belief .....	55
2.3 Rejection of Foundationalism.....	57
2.4 Mystical Experience as Cognition .....	63
2.5 Epistemological Structure.....	68
2.6 The Critical Realist Principle .....	71
Chapter 3: Who or What is God?.....	74
3.1 God as Ineffable.....	74
3.2 God as Transcendent.....	78
3.3 God as Incomprehensible .....	81
3.4 The Essence of God.....	82
3.5 Laws of Logic.....	95
3.6 The Logos Doctrine .....	107
Chapter 4: God's Self-Disclosure.....	119
4.1 Biblical General Revelation.....	119
4.2 Pluralistic General Revelation.....	124
Chapter 5: God's Universal Influence .....	129
5.1 God's Spirit at Work in All Religions? .....	129
5.2 Comparable Levels of Morality.....	129
5.3 Demonstrably Low levels of Morality.....	132
5.4 The Presence of a Common Religious Experience .....	137

Chapter 6: The Distinctive Character of Christian Regeneration.....	144
6.1 Regeneration Defined.....	144
6.2 Regeneration and Religious Experience .....	147
6.3 Regeneration and the Spirit of God.....	151
6.4 Regeneration and the Principle of Credulity .....	158
6.5 The Relationship of the Spirit to the World System .....	161
Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks.....	164
7.1 The Corpus of Hick's Writings.....	164
7.2 Hick's Defence of the Pluralistic Hypothesis .....	164
7.3 Hick's Engagement with Christian Theology .....	165
7.4 Hick's Contribution to Religious Epistemology.....	168
7.5 Hick's Critique of Christian History .....	168
Bibliography .....	170



### ***Acknowledgements***

I wish to say a huge thanks to my lovely wife Alison, without whose inspiration and encouragement this thesis would never have seen the light of day. Alison is one of life's great encouragers, who constantly sacrifices and promotes the happiness and wellbeing of everyone else around her. Arriving home on dark winter nights, after long hours of teaching, she would think nothing of sitting at the laptop to check the spelling and grammar of the thesis before cheerfully exhorting me to press on to the next section.

It would also be remiss of me not to extend my thanks to Professor Donald Macleod of Edinburgh Theological Seminary. Donald showed great patience as huge chunks of time would pass with no communication from me. Whenever anything did arrive on his desk, it was usually before edits, without prior notice, in the form of solid blocks of paragraph with few or no headings and with possibly the least number of commas per page than any manuscript ever written. All Donald's comments were very scholarly and apt, and made me wish that he had himself written so much more than the many books he has penned thus far.

Finally, I wish to say how touching it was to be constantly encouraged by the Free Church of Scotland fellowship in Govan. Many of our folk have no formal qualifications whatsoever, and have few positive memories of school. Yet each person seemed to take great delight in, and derive some pride from, the fact that having come from Govan myself, I was pursuing these studies.

## *Chapter 1: John Hick's Spiritual and Theological Journey to Religious Pluralism*

### *1.1 Introduction*

Writing during the last quarter of the twentieth century Harvard historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith asserted:

The time will soon be with us when a theologian who attempts to work out his position unaware that he does so as a member of a world society in which other theologians equally intelligent, equally devout, equally moral, are Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and unaware that his readers are likely to be Buddhists or to have Muslim husbands or Hindu colleagues-such a theologian is as out of date as one who attempts, to construct an intellectual position unaware that Aristotle has thought about the world or that existentialists have raised new orientations or unaware that the earth is a minor planet in a galaxy that is vast only by terrestrial standards. Philosophy and science have impinged so far on theological thought more effectively than has comparative religion, but this will not last.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the relationship of Christianity to the non-Christian religions has indeed become and remains a major point of theological and philosophical debate. It is within this debate that theologian and philosopher John Hick has established his reputation as an

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," in Willard Oxtoby, ed., *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, 9.

innovative thinker and first- rate scholar. Indeed Christopher Sinkinson has written concerning Hick:

No academic study of the Christian response to religious diversity is complete without interaction with his work; and no academic religious studies course has truly equipped its students unless they are familiar with his arguments.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly Victoria S. Harrison comments:

Hick is probably the most innovative and influential twentieth-century philosopher of religion, having concentrated on the issues raised by the conflicting claims of the various world religions.<sup>3</sup>

What perhaps adds to the considerable interest shown in the work of Hick is that his standing as one of the most influential philosophers of religion of his day was resultant upon a personal religious, moral, and spiritual pilgrimage from Christian exclusivism to a form of global religious pluralism.

Perhaps at the outset it might be helpful to outline the core claims of John Hick's interpretation of religious plurality. Keith E. Yandell<sup>4</sup> summarises it in the following way:

1. Each religion asks generically the same question: how do we get from our present lack to a better future?

---

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths: A Critical Study of John Hick's Religious Pluralism*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria S. Harrison, *Religion and Modern Thought*, 209.

<sup>4</sup> Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 67-68

2. Each world religion is a response to the same thing.
3. Each world religion has its own phenomenal reality.
4. Since each world religion has its own phenomenal reality, the claims of one world religion do not conflict with those of another world religion.
5. Responding to this phenomenal reality is so far as we can tell, equally effective in each world religion.
6. Each world religion is equally valid.
7. The sentences that apparently express the doctrines of the great world religions actually are mythological in the sense of telling story which elicits behaviour.
8. The mythology is true if the behaviour is good.
9. The reason for accepting religious pluralism is that it is the best explanation for central facts about religious plurality.

### *1.2 Early Christian Influences*

John Harwood Hick was born on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1922 in Scarborough Yorkshire. Christopher Sinkinson's critical examination of Hick's life and work published in 2001 suggests that in his childhood years Hick had little or no concern with religious matters. He writes:

His childhood was not marked by any great interest in religion as he found the parish church his family attended as a matter of infinite boredom.<sup>5</sup>

However, in his autobiography published in 2002 Hick indeed testifies to a sense of serious enquiry on religious matters from a young age and this was wedded to a keen philosophical cast of mind. Indeed, an awareness of a sense of deity seemed to possess him from his earliest days. He writes:

Although the church had nothing directly to do with it I have from as early as I can remember had a rather strong sense of the reality of God as the personal and loving lord of the universe and of life as having a meaning within God's purpose.<sup>6</sup>

His mother was actively involved in spiritualism<sup>7</sup> while his grandmother enjoyed a keen interest in the British Israelite movement. George Jeffreys, founder in 1926 of the Four Square Gospel Alliance (the forerunner to the Elim Pentecostal Church), was often a guest at the Hick household. Hick recalls that at twelve years of age, upon visiting the family, Jeffreys:

... laid his hands on my head and I immediately felt a strong physical effect, like an electric shock except that it was not a sharp bolt but a pervasive sensation spreading

---

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths: A Critical Study of John Hick's Religious Pluralism*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 28.

down through my body. I was in floods of tears; not of sadness or fright but I suppose a tremendous emotional impact.<sup>8</sup>

As a young adult Hick was introduced to the Theosophy movement and of this period of his life he writes:

I was attracted by theosophy as the first coherent religious philosophy that I had met – much more so than the Christianity I knew.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this time Hick was also an avid reader of philosophy. At sixteen he was reading Plato, Descartes, Locke, Berkley, Hume and Kant. Even at this stage of young adulthood some of his philosophical reflections seem remarkably consistent with the position he was to arrive at later in his academic career, when he would speak of God being “trans-categorical.” The following is taken from a collection of recorded aphorisms produced when Hick was eighteen years of age:

Reality is ethical and consists of God who cannot be regarded as finite or infinite, or as having any or no form, or by any other analogy from the physical universe, but can only be comprehended “mystically”, by reason of the divine spark in each of us.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 32.

It was at University College, Hull, where he was studying law that Hick seemed to progress beyond a general spiritual search to a particular experiential and doctrinal fulfilment of the same. He records:

As a law student at University College, Hull, at the age of 18 I underwent a powerful evangelical conversion under the impact of the New Testament figure of Jesus. For several days I was in a state of intense mental and emotional turmoil, during which I became increasingly aware of a higher and greater reality pressing in upon me and claiming my recognition and response. At first this was highly unwelcome; a disturbing and challenging demand for nothing less than a revolution in personal identity. But then the disturbing claim became a liberating invitation. The reality that was pressing in upon me was not only awesomely demanding but also irresistibly attractive and I entered with great joy and excitement into the world of Christian faith.<sup>11</sup>

He adds:

I accepted as a whole and without question the entire fundamentalist theological package – the verbal inspiration of the Bible; creation and fall; Jesus as God the Son incarnate, born of a virgin, conscious of his divine nature and performing of divine power, redemption by his blood from sin and guilt; Jesus' bodily resurrection, ascension and future return in glory and heaven and hell.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 34.

At this point Hick would have been quite at ease with the traditional and conservative view of the historical accuracy of The New Testament, represented in the following three statements:

There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical writers, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.<sup>14</sup>

And again:

We generally assume people are telling the truth unless we have good reasons to think otherwise. There is simply no reason for refusing to apply this assumption to ancient people as well. Indeed, as we discussed in the last chapter, if historians were not willing to apply this common courtesy to ancient authors, *most* of our information about ancient history would be disqualified. If, for example historians assumed that accounts in the writings of ancient historians such as Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, or Livy could not be trusted until each account could be

---

<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 15.



individually proven trustworthy, we would have concluded that we know next to nothing about Greco-Roman times!<sup>15</sup>

As a result of this life-changing experience Hick decided automatically to switch from legal studies to train for the Christian ministry within the Presbyterian Church of England. With this goal in mind he enrolled at the University of Edinburgh intending to pursue an Arts degree before going on to study theology. Having enrolled at Edinburgh University for the academic year 1941-42 Hick's studies were interrupted by the war. For 3 years he served in The First Ambulance Unit as a conscientious objector. He did not graduate until 1948 but did so as an outstanding student. His achievement of a first class honours degree was enhanced further by the senior philosophy medal, and the Vans Dunlop Scholarship. Hick declined the latter in favour of the Campbell-Frazer scholarship to Oriel College Oxford thus enabling him to pursue further studies in philosophy.

### *1.3 Disengagement from Fundamentalist Christianity*

The time in Edinburgh was significant in respect of two issues. First, Hick progressively disentangled himself from the Evangelical Union of Students with whom he had so much in common during the first year of his studies. This parting of the ways according to Hick was resultant upon his willingness to entertain doubts about the credibility of certain core

---

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege*, 98-109.

fundamentalist and doctrinal beliefs including the judicial aspect of Christian eschatology.

He writes:

And could it be an expression of infinite love to sentence the large majority of the human race to eternal torment in hell?<sup>16</sup>

By the time Hick was writing his fourth book *Christianity at the Centre* published in 1968 not only had he jettisoned many core traditional Christian doctrines but understood that continued adherence to such would result in the marginalisation or perhaps the extinction of the church in a scientific age. He writes:

The question today is whether such beliefs are of the permanent essence of Christianity; or whether they belong to the history of its interaction with the pre-scientific culture which has only recently come to an end. If the former, Christianity is doomed to the role of a fading superstition. But if the latter these mythical concepts can be properly left behind as Christianity advances into a new culture of modern science.<sup>17</sup>

#### *1.4 Philosopher of Religion*

The second significant development connected to his Edinburgh years was his growing appreciation of the work of Immanuel Kant in general and in particular Kant's

---

<sup>16</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> John Hick, *Christianity at the Centre*, 9.

noumenal/phenomenal distinction, which Hick was eventually to employ as an epistemological tool in his pluralistic philosophy.

Indeed, such was Hick's admiration of Kant at this point that he writes:

I agree with Bryan Magee when he says that 'I hold the greatest single achievement in the history of philosophy to be Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal.'<sup>18</sup>

Having secured the Campbell-Frazer scholarship, Hick proceeded to Oriel College Oxford where, under the supervision of H.H. Price, he completed his PhD. The area of Hick's research lay in the philosophy of religion, within which he sought to examine the epistemology of religious belief, or the relationship between faith and knowledge.

From 1953 to 1956 Hick served as a Christian minister in Belford Presbyterian Church, having studied for the Ministry at Westminster College Cambridge from 1951 to 1953. Westminster seemed to add very little to Hick's intellectual development other than the conviction that he had no appetite or aptitude for biblical languages. Neither at this stage did he have any interest in other religions apart from Christianity. However, he did attend lectures at Cambridge University delivered by John Wisdom and C.D. Broad from which Hick derived some benefit. Speaking of Wisdom's idiosyncratic style of lecturing Hick recalls:

His lectures were completely unstructured and unprepared and one listened, bored stiff to his meanderings until every few weeks he said something so arresting and

---

<sup>18</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 68.

thought provoking that one came back for more. One such sentence which I have treasured ever since was that doing metaphysics is like finding a pattern in a puzzle picture. This was a brilliant use of Wittgenstein's discussion of *seeing-as*, and was for me a clue to the nature of religious experience and religious faith.<sup>19</sup>

In 1954 Cornell University approached Hick inviting him to apply for a job as an assistant professor to teach philosophy of religion. In January 1956 after 3 years in Belford, Hick travelled to the USA and so began his academic career. Cornell had a strong philosophy department with a keen interest in promoting the earlier and later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Additionally, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr visited the university.

### *1.5 The Structure of Faith*

During his time in Cornell, stretching from 1956-1959, Hick further developed the theme of his earlier doctoral dissertation. The finished product was a book entitled *Faith and Knowledge* published in 1957 by Cornell University Press. Insofar as Cornell was a member of the *Ivy League* fraternal of educational institutions, this publishing of his work was a solid endorsement of Hick's potential as philosopher of religion. The book went through various revisions, editions and printings over a period of 31 years. However, his only other publication of note at this time was an article in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*<sup>20</sup> criticising

---

<sup>19</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> John Hick, *The Christology of D. M. Baillie*.

the Christology of Donald Baillie, whose work Hick at this time regarded as a step in the wrong direction, insofar as it was a serious departure from Chalcedon orthodoxy.

*Faith and Knowledge* is an important work in the corpus of Hick's writings for the simple reason that despite his prodigious literary output throughout his academic career his epistemology was to remain largely consistent with that which he espoused in this his first book.

Hick rejects what he calls the scholastic conception of faith, in which faith is understood to be a response to certain propositions set forth in the Bible. This concept of faith he replaces by a faith rooted in one's actual experience of God. Hick suggests that two elements are present in his own understanding of faith: firstly, that which he takes to be the basic characteristic of human experience, i.e. '*significance*', which he defines in the following way:

By *significance* I mean that fundamental and all pervasive characteristic of our conscious experience which *de facto* constitutes for us the experience of a "world" and not of a mere empty void or churning chaos. We find ourselves in a relatively stable and ordered environment in which we have come to feel, so to say, "at home." The world has become intelligible to us, in the sense that it is a familiar place in which we have learned to act and react in appropriate ways. Our experience is not just an unpredictable kaleidoscope of which we are bewildered spectators, but reveals to us a familiar, settled cosmos in which we live and act, a world in which we can adopt purposes and adapt means to ends. It is in virtue of this homely, familiar, intelligible character of experience—its possession of significance—that we are able to inhabit and cope with our environment. If this use of "significance" be allowed it

will, I think, readily be granted that our consciousness is essentially consciousness of significance.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, he introduces the notion of the experience of '*interpretation*', which Hick understands to be the correlative mental activity by which the *significance* is apprehended. Religious interpretation is thus a perception of significance rather than an inference from or to certain propositions. As Hick further explains:

The primary religious perception, or basic act of religious interpretation, is not to be described as either a reasoned conclusion or an unreasoned hunch that there is a God. It is, putatively, an apprehension of the divine presence within the believer's human experience. It is not an inference to a general truth, but a "divine-human encounter," a mediated meeting with the living God.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the believer apprehends God as a living reality but this apprehension of the divine is not independent of, neither does it exist in isolation from, all other factors that make up his life's experience. This apprehension of God is one that meets him in and through the totality of his experience and not one that circumvents or compartmentalises his experience of reality. One becomes vividly conscious of the presence and activity of the divine being because this is how the totality of our experience is being interpreted to us.

---

<sup>21</sup>John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 98.

<sup>22</sup>John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 115.

Knowing God, therefore, according to Hick, is not any different in its epistemological structure than that of how we come to the knowledge of other things. According to Hick, the difference between knowing at a religious level and other forms of knowledge is not one of kind but of the level of reality known. All knowledge according to Hick follows and conforms to the same epistemological structure i.e. all knowledge is the human interpretation of objective realities. Thus he writes:

We shall find that interpretation takes place in relation to each of the three main types of existence... the natural, the human and the divine; and that in order to relate ourselves appropriately to each, a primary and unevidenceable act of interpretation is required which, when directed toward God, has traditionally been termed "faith." Thus I shall try to show that while the object of religious knowledge is unique, its basic epistemological pattern is that of all our knowing.<sup>23</sup>

At this point it may be helpful to establish that Hick is saying something different from, but similar to, the traditional Christian teaching on the doctrine of General Revelation. What Hick is arguing for is not the presence of a universal and pre-interpreted revelation equally available to all mankind which provides testimony to God's existence. Such a view presupposes a universe that is unambiguous while serving as an instrument of revelation to confirm the existence of God. Hick is speaking of a universe that can be both interpreted and experienced in various ways just as differing patterns and shapes can be detected in puzzle pictures. Thus for the theist the natural world is one that for him is infused with the

---

<sup>23</sup>John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 96-97.

sense of divine presence. However, for the naturalist the same universe is not one that functions as a catalyst for any divine transcendent experience. Thus both the religious and non-religious person would be rational and therefore within their epistemic rights to hold contrary interpretations of reality although ultimately one may be false and the other true. He writes:

The universe as envisaged by the theist, then, differs as a totality from the universe as envisaged by the atheist. However, from our present standpoint within the universe, this difference does not involve a difference in the objective content of each or even of its passing moments. The theist and the atheist do not (or need not) expect different events to occur in successive details of the temporal process.<sup>24</sup>

And again:

Yet our human existence itself, considered apart from the interpretative responses of the human mind remains ambiguous and equally capable of being 'experienced as' in a religious or in a naturalist manner.<sup>25</sup>

As to the provision of a principle of verification according to which one belief may be confirmed or disconfirmed Hick proposes the experience of an eschatological verification or post-mortem encounter with God.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> John Hick, *Christianity at the Centre*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 177-78.



The question naturally arises as to why God should choose to make his presence known in such an indirect and uncertain way, and not through some powerful and irrefutable manifestation of his majesty, power and glory? Hick locates the answer in the nature of loving relationships. In order for a loving relationship to be authentic the element of free choice, and not coercion, must be present. Thus he writes:

The process of becoming aware of God, if not to destroy the frail autonomy of the human personality must involve the individual's own freely responding insight and assent. Within this sphere God is self-discovered in ways that allow us the fateful freedom to recognise or fail to recognise God's presence. Divine activity always leaves room for the awareness of God that preserves our cognitive freedom in relation to an infinitely greater and superior reality.<sup>27</sup>

In 1959 Hick was appointed Professor of Christian Philosophy at Princeton University. In some ways the appointment seemed strange, because Hick took the view that while it was possible to be a Christian philosopher, there was no actual system of Christian philosophy as such. It was at this stage Hick produced his book published by Prentice Hall entitled *Philosophy of Religion*. This was part of a new series of short books on all aspects of philosophy, written by various recognised authorities in differing fields. Despite writing the book in a very short period of time, Hick's work was very well received. The publication went through various reprints, and was also translated into a number of different languages.

---

<sup>27</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 65.

### 1.6 Theological Controversy

Despite his growing reputation as an innovative thinker, Hick's time at Princeton was dogged by theological controversy. In short, his adherence to certain doctrines contained in the 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith was called into question. The issue was resolved in favour of Hick by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, on the grounds that latitude was extended to those whose integrity could not allow them to affirm all the teachings of the Westminster Confession. The Presbytery decision to receive Hick as a member resulted in a letter of complaint being drafted to the New Jersey Synod by those who objected to the Presbytery's affirmation of Hick. Much to the surprise of the majority of the Presbytery, this complaint was upheld and his membership of the Presbytery rescinded. What added some urgency to the situation was that failure to secure a seat on the Presbytery would automatically strip Hick of his professorship at Princeton. Another counter complaint was then addressed to the 1962 General Assembly in support of Hick, which was eventually upheld and his position was secure.

### 1.7 A Christian Theodicy

In 1963-64 Hick received a *Guggenheim Fellowship* that enabled him to engage with the topic of the problem of evil. This combined with a half year sabbatical from Princeton allowed him to carry out research at Cambridge University. It was at this time he produced his second major work entitled *Evil and the God of Love*. The book has been reprinted many times and is widely regarded as Hick's best work. Hick sets forth a Christian theodicy structured around the thought of Irenaeus, but quite distinct from what he understands as

the Augustinian theodicy predicated upon an acceptance of an orthodox reading of the early chapters of Genesis. He writes:

The traditional solution (representing the theological in distinction from the philosophical side of Augustine's thought on the theodicy problem) finds the origin of evil, as we have seen, in the fall, which was the beginning both of sin and as its punishment, of man's sorrows and suffering. But this theory so simple and mythologically satisfying is open to insuperable scientific, moral, and logical objections.<sup>28</sup>

Towards the end of the sabbatical year a University lectureship at Cambridge became vacant. This brought to an end Hick's tenure at Princeton. The initial appointment at Cambridge was for 3 years. Ordinarily, this would have been followed by a tenure appointment until retirement at 67. However in 1967 the H.G. Wood chair of theology at Birmingham University became vacant and Hick secured the Professorship.

### *1.8 Inter-Faith Dialogue*

The particular attraction of this appointment was that it offered Hick the opportunity to pursue his primary interest in philosophy of religion with greater freedom than had been possible up until this point in his academic career. It was also the beginning of a new phase in his thinking, as he found himself drawn increasingly into inter-faith dialogue with

---

<sup>28</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 285.

adherents of other world religions, whose life seemed to exemplify or mirror the qualities that were present in the lives of Christians.

This he writes concerning Buddhism:

It is incumbent upon the Christian theologian to explain how a religion that is from a theistic point of view so totally wrong can have fruits in human life that are certainly not inferior to Christianity's.<sup>29</sup>

And again:

Few have faced more than superficially the issues raised by the fact that Christianity is only one of the great world faiths, and does not seem, when viewed throughout history and around the world, to be spiritually, intellectually or morally superior to all other religious traditions, as, however, its theology implicitly claims. And so the theologian whose head is not buried in the ecclesiastical sand has either to make a convincing case for Christianity's superiority or prepare to rethink those of its dogmas which misleadingly imply such superiority.<sup>30</sup>

Hick supported these assertions by identifying what he rightly regarded as clear examples of a religion seemingly bankrupt of moral standards consistent with its ethical claims. For example, speaking of his travels in the USA he writes:

---

<sup>29</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 148.

From Claremont I travelled all over the States to give lectures and take part in conferences. A few trips were into the Deep South where the American Civil War was still called by some the War of Northern Aggression. One such was to a College in Mobile Alabama. Whilst there I went on Sunday to the large Southern Baptist church which was famously photographed in the 1960's with the deacons standing in a row at the door to keep blacks out.<sup>31</sup>

During a visit to South Africa Hick records:

The largest white church, the Dutch Reformed, supported apartheid and defended it on Biblical grounds. Most of the English speaking church leaders opposed apartheid but did not have the support of their laity... the evangelical/charismatic movement with the Anglican Church enabled people to shut the whole situation out of their minds.<sup>32</sup>

### *1.9 A Copernican Shift in Theology*

The task of engaging with this question and other related issues saw the publication of a collection of essays by Hick in 1972 entitled *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Several of its chapters provide an exposition of Hick's shifting convictions towards religious pluralism. Three of the chapters (8, 9, and 10) were originally delivered in 1972 as a series of public

---

<sup>31</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 257.

<sup>32</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 249.

lectures in Birmingham, under the titles of '*The Essence of Christianity*', '*The Copernican Revolution in Theology*' and '*The New Map of The Universe of Faiths*'. Chapter 7, '*The Reconstruction of Christian Belief*', was originally two articles published in 1970. All of these chapters form an early, but coherent, argument for Hick's emerging pluralist hypothesis.

The catalyst for this radical new departure in Hick's thinking was his own experience of and engagement with other religious faiths in Birmingham. Realising that the cultic practices and doctrinal formulations set each belief system apart, he sought to explore the possibility that at the experiential level all devotees were engaging in the same transcendent dynamic or religious quest.

An initial introduction to Hick's thought on the issue finds expression in the chapter entitled '*The Reconstruction of Christian Belief*'<sup>33</sup> where he suggests that the concept of religions as distinct and bounded historical phenomena with mutually exclusive systems of belief is an artificial and socially determined construction. In other words, the institutions, doctrines, codes of behaviour, and identity markers that mark out one religion from another did not arise because the spirituality of any given religion required this. The differentiating of one system from the other was resultant on the human but essentially western tendency to erect beliefs and practices that safeguard the group's identity. In this he is following the thought of Wilfred Cantwell Smith as unpacked in his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 92-107.

<sup>34</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

In keeping with Cantwell Smith Hick proposes that the historical development of religion should be viewed as a dynamic continuum within which new movements are simply great creative and spiritual disturbances which impact upon the stream of religious consciousness and in doing so add to our existing knowledge of God. Insofar as we can no longer speak of truth and falsity with regard to world faiths certain implications follow. First, the subject matter included in the study of theology must now comprise all religious movements that feed into this stream of religious consciousness. Secondly, the new task of theological study is to sift through these differing but complimentary faiths in order to identify whatever universal spiritual and transcendent experience is common to all and this with a view to the formation of a global theology.

Hick's essay '*The Essence of Christianity*' builds upon this reinterpretation of the historical development of religion in attempting to clarify that which is most important to the Christian community. In identifying this it will provide him with a point of comparison with which to compare the essence of other world faiths. Hick at this point differentiates that which is *unique* to the Christian faith, from that which is *most important* to the Christian. He identifies that which is most important to the Christian community as being of the essence of faith. The essence of Christianity, he suggests, is not to be found in the confessional liturgy of orthodox belief, but in the relational and attitudinal praxis of the Christian community, as it is inspired towards a particular code of social conduct by the *person* of Jesus.

Recognising that it may seem rather odd not to identify the divine nature of Jesus as being of the essence of faith, Hick responds by locating this claim to deity, not in the words of Jesus himself, but rather in the response of the later Church to Jesus. Thus he writes:

It is extremely unlikely that Jesus thought of himself or that his first disciples thought of him as God incarnate.<sup>35</sup>

The problem faced by Hick at this point was that he still wished to say something about Jesus as an historical figure. He does, after all, tell us quite a bit about Jesus as a religious and saintly figure who was vividly conscious of, and close to, God. Presumably this testimony is drawn from the gospel records or, at least, those portions of the gospel records, which he takes to be authentic. In other words, Hick has to concede some biographical details, or minimal core of sayings about Jesus, that place him in this light as a religious leader. However, the difficulty he encounters is that in so doing he is confronted with the fact that everything significant that is disclosed in word or deed about Jesus as a religious person seems infused with a high Christology.

The ubiquitous presence of a high Christology in any grouping of approved sayings attributed to Jesus is highlighted by R. Douglas Geivett and W. Garry Philips. Commenting upon the work of Royce Gruenler they write:

Norman Perrin, a Bultmanian scholar, who applied form-critical methods and the so-called criterion of dissimilarity to an analysis of the Gospels, produced a

---

<sup>35</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, P114.



compendium of Jesus' teachings that may confidently be considered authentic.

Evangelical scholar Royce Gruenler has patiently examined each item countenanced by Perrin, paying particular attention to the way Jesus' self-concept is disclosed by his words and deeds. His conclusion is that the Christology implicit in the approved core of sayings is indistinguishable from the high Christology of the more explicit sayings attributed to Jesus throughout the Gospels and repudiated by radical critics.<sup>36</sup>

Within Hick's conceptual scheme Jesus was a simply a man deeply aware of the presence of God in his life, and it is this phenomenon that set him apart from others while conferring upon him an aura not dissimilar to that which was present in other great religious leaders such as Buddha. He writes:

What seems to have happened during the hundred years or so following Jesus death was that the language of divine sonship floated loose from the original ground of Jewish thought and developed a new meaning as it took root again in Greco-Roman culture.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the primitive response to Jesus was progressively expanded and clothed with conceptual categories already residing in the cultural, religious and intellectual milieu of the world into which the church carried the message about Jesus. Thus, by implication, if

---

<sup>36</sup>R. Douglas Geivett and W. Garry Philips, "Response to John Hick," in Stanley N. Grundy, Denis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 72-73.

<sup>37</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 116.

Christianity at this stage had expanded eastward, the portrait of Jesus would have reflected religious thought-patterns already present in that eastern culture.

He explains:

If for example it had moved very early into India in which Buddhism was then becoming a powerful influence and the Mahayana doctrines were being developed, it is likely that instead of Jesus being identified as the divine Logos or divine Son he would have been identified as a Bodhisattva who like Gotama some four centuries earlier had attained to Buddhahood or perfect relationship to reality but had in compassion for suffering mankind voluntarily lived out his human life in order to show others the way of salvation.<sup>38</sup>

Hick's next essay entitled 'The Copernican Revolution in Theology', which forms chapter 9 in *God and the Universe of Faiths*, is essentially a continuance of his previous argument outworked in relation to other world faiths. Much of the essay is taken up with Hick's rebuttal of any form of inclusivism or exclusivism. Traditional exclusivism, which has been the historic position of the Church, Hick rejects on the grounds that it entails a moral contradiction. He writes:

Can we then 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 in fact receive this salvation? It is the weight of this moral

---

<sup>38</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 117.

contradiction that has driven Christian thinkers in modern times to explore other ways of understanding the human religious situation.<sup>39</sup>

This rejection of traditional exclusivism is followed by his attempt to dismantle the softer position of some Christian theologians, according to which devotees of other faiths are understood to be saved by the merits of Christ's death, although not themselves aware of any such arrangement. This inclusivism sought to distinguish the ontological necessity of Christ's atoning work, and the epistemological necessity of actually hearing about and responding to this in a cognitive manner. Various arguments have been adduced in favour of this position, not the least of which is an analogy drawn from the argument that the Church has always allowed for God's grace to be extended to certain categories of people for whom a cognitive response was not possible prior to, or at the time of, their death.

Thus we read in the Westminster Confession:

Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the spirit who worketh when and where and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.<sup>40</sup>

The extent to which an analogy can be legitimately drawn from those who are cognitively incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word, to those who are

---

<sup>39</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 122-123.

<sup>40</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith. Chapter 10 v3.

circumstantially located beyond the reach of the gospel, is of no concern to Hick. He rejects any inclusivism as a sort of half-way house which still retains the vestiges of a western imperialism in theology. Just as there was a Copernican revolution in man's thinking about the universe and the position of the earth in relation to it, the theological need of the day was a similar paradigm shift in our understanding of world religion that repositioned God at the centre, with the universe of faiths revolving around him. Thus he writes:

Now the Copernican revolution in astronomy consisted in a transformation in the way in which men understood the universe and their own location within it. It involved a shift from the dogma that the earth is at the centre of the revolving universe to the realisation that it is the sun that is at the centre with all the planets, including our own earth, moving around it. And the needed Copernican revolution in theology involves an equally radical transformation in our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our religion within it. It involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is God who is at the centre and that all the religions of mankind including our own serve and revolve around him.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 130-131.

### 1.10 *The Myth of God Incarnate*

However innovative Hick's emerging theology was, it was clear that the historic confession and teaching of the Church with regard to the Incarnation of Jesus as the Christ could not be accommodated within his Copernican shift:

I came fairly soon to see that for Christianity the problem of religious plurality hinged on the central doctrine of the incarnation. If Jesus was God incarnate, Christianity alone among the world religions was founded by God in person and must therefore be uniquely superior to all others. This made me look again at the traditional doctrine and its history.<sup>42</sup>

Hick conceived the idea of a book of essays that would represent the emerging consensus among certain scholars and theologians that the Incarnation was not to be understood as an historical fact. Indeed, Jesus himself, according to such contemporary thought, did not actually teach the incarnation but, like other doctrines of the Christian faith, the deification of Jesus of Nazareth was resultant upon the teaching of the Church as she was influenced by Greek philosophy and Near Eastern mythology. Thus in 1977 the collection of essays was published under the title *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The book sold around 30,000 copies in the first month, creating something of a media circus as various camps within the church responded to the book's central thesis.

---

<sup>42</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 227.

The publication itself is divided into 2 sections. The first section incorporates a series of essays structured around the question of sources relating to the incarnation, while the second section sets forth the contributors' views on how the doctrine of the Incarnation developed within the believing community. Hick's contribution to the work is found in the second section of the book and is entitled 'Jesus and the World Religions'.<sup>43</sup>

Hick's first objection to the doctrine of the Incarnation is an historical one. According to Hick the traditional understanding was not taught by Jesus, but was resultant upon the later teaching of the Church. Indeed the part played by the Christian community in the development of the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation was, according to Hick, paralleled in the way followers of Gautama in the Mahayana tradition progressively exalted the Buddha to divine status. The founder of Buddhism was a real historical figure living in north-east India from about 563-483 BC. At some point the human figure of Gautama was taken to be the incarnation of a transcendent and pre-existent Buddha or the truth made flesh. This development, according to Hick, simply reflected the religious impulse of the spiritual community to express their adoration of the movement's founder in the most exalted terms that the host culture had to offer. This dynamic, Hick understands, is paralleled in the way in which Jesus, the unknown man of Nazareth, is through the influence of the Christian community progressively exalted to the status of the logos becoming flesh. Should someone identify the resurrection of Jesus as that which distinguishes Christ from Buddha, Hick meets this objection with the following rebuttal:

---

<sup>43</sup> John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 167-187.

We cannot ascertain today in what this resurrection-event consisted. The possibilities range from the resuscitation of Jesus' corpse to visions of the Lord in resplendent glory. But it must be doubted whether the resurrection-event – whatever its nature – was seen by Jesus' contemporaries as guaranteeing his divinity.<sup>44</sup>

Hick raises a second problem with the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation. His focus at this point moves from the historical development under the influence of the Church to what he takes to be the doctrine's incoherence. In other words he suggests that the formulation of the doctrine does not admit of any non-metaphorical meaning and is therefore devoid of any rational content. He writes:

Orthodoxy insisted upon the two natures human and divine co-inhering in the one historical Jesus Christ. But orthodoxy has never been able to give this idea any content. It remains a form of words without assignable meaning. For to say without explanation that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that a circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square. Such locution has to be given semantic content: and in the case of the language of incarnation all content thus far suggested has had to be repudiated. The Chalcedonian formula in which the attempt rested merely reiterated that Jesus was both God and man but made no attempt to interpret the formula.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 170.

<sup>45</sup> John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 179.

The controversy generated by Hick's denial of the Incarnation as historical fact, tended to obscure the validity of his request for clarity concerning the actual language of the Incarnation. As a representative of the analytical school of philosophy it was only natural that Hick should seek clarity and explanation with regard to the meaning of the words set forth in the Chalcedonian prescription. The view that the formulation as articulated was difficult to comprehend, found support in philosophers who in all other respects were theologically orthodox. Responding to Hick's assertion that the language used by the early church lacks meaningful content, we find Gordon Clark writing:

The Council assembled in 451 to determine the issue, only half succeeded. With fair clarity it managed to decide what the Incarnation was not, but came nowhere near defining what the Incarnation was. The Creed's positive terminology was and remains either ambiguous or meaningless.<sup>46</sup>

However, Hick's contention went further than a request for clarity. From his square circle analogy it would appear that his fundamental question is, whether the concept of humanity and divinity with their essential properties are mutually exclusive, and if so, how can they be predicated of the same person? Jesus could be either truly man or truly God, but certainly not both. This, according to Hick, involved a metaphysical impossibility, and could not therefore be true. In the light of what Hick understands to be the doctrine's incoherence, he suggests that it is more reasonable to adopt a view of the Incarnation according to which it is mythological in character. Hick is not suggesting that the language about Jesus is entirely

---

<sup>46</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation*, 14.



illusory or false, but that it is poetic hyperbole, representing a spiritual truth that invites an appropriate response.

In general, Hick's overall objection seems strange for a scholar of world religions. Cultural anthropologists familiar with the world of animism, shamanism and folk-Islam all testify to the reality of dual centres of consciousness co-existing within one human body. The reality of spiritual beings, for example familiar spirits, communicating through, while residing within, another person, such as a witch doctor, is commonplace in world religion. The medium retains his or her distinct identity, as does the familiar spirit that occupies and mediates through him or her. In other words, two specific personalities with independent minds and centres of consciousness co-exist in the one human frame, yet retain distinct identities at the same time.

Hick's essay evoked a range of scholarly philosophical responses, suggesting that the charge of incoherence was not as self-evident as he imagined.

Thus we find Thomas Morris writing:

The philosophical question here is whether orthodoxy embraces a possibility. Can the doctrine even possibly be true? In recent years many of the critics of the doctrine have claimed that the doctrine is incoherent. But I believe that a strategy of defence is available which, surprisingly, is fairly simple.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God*, 162.

Morris employs a series of distinctions that he suggests set up grounds for a rebuttal of the charge of incoherence. He makes a distinction between (a) *kind-essence* and *individual-essence* (b) *universal-properties* and *essential properties*, and (c) *fully-human* and *merely human*.

The nub of the argument is that Hick's charge of incoherence would only stand if the Christian claim is that Jesus had two *individual-essences*. However, the ontology of the incarnation is explained in terms of Jesus possessing two *kind-essences*, being fully human, but not merely human. While it may be unusual for a being to possess two *kind-essences*, it certainly does not involve a claim that is irrational. Morris adopts a two minds view of the incarnation, according to which Jesus had a divine mind that contained, but was not contained by, the human mind.

Hick's third objection to the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation is ostensibly ethical in character: if Jesus was indeed God in the flesh, then it stands to reason that Christianity is exclusively the way to God. The clear implication of this assertion is that other ways of salvation as taught by rival world faiths are invalid, and great numbers of religious devotees are eternally lost.

### *1.11 An Interpretation of Religion*

In 1978 Hick delivered a lecture at Claremont Graduate University and was subsequently offered the position of Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion. For his first three years, he split his year between Claremont and Birmingham but in 1982 Hick moved full-time to

Claremont. The attraction of Claremont for Hick lay in the move from teaching undergraduate students to purely graduate, and also the place accorded by Claremont to the study of the philosophy of religion. Unlike Birmingham where the philosophy of religion had a marginal place in academia, Claremont provided Hick with an expansive opportunity to pursue issues dear to his heart. He spent the next ten years at Claremont teaching, organizing conferences in philosophy of religion, and developing his pluralistic hypothesis. In 1989 Macmillan and Yale University Press published his *magnum opus*, *An Interpretation of Religion*, the substance of which was drawn from his earlier Gifford Lectures delivered in 1986-87. The publication was acclaimed as a major contribution to the field of religious studies, earning Hick the prestigious Grawemeyer Award and selling over 600,000 copies in several languages. Wilfred Cantwell Smith of Harvard endorsed the work in the following terms:

A movement has been growing among Christians gaining of late in numbers and in strength, to appreciate the faith of other religious groups, recognising the spiritual depth and the divine grace made available through other traditions as through the Christian. Lacking until now however has been a philosophically sophisticated statement of the position. Here it is. The rest of us cannot but be grateful.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Commendation, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

Hick's work represents an attempt to critique the phenomenon of religion in its plurality of forms, not by means of any specific confessional formula, but rather through a universal religious framework. His argument proceeds along a number of lines before setting forth his pluralistic hypothesis. The plurality of beliefs that separate one faith from another, he explains in terms of historical circumstance. In short, people subscribe to a given confession because they are born within a particular religious culture. It is this existing religious culture which structures any given response to a transcendent awareness of the divine reality.

Hick understands this transcendent experience to be one that delivers to us a consciousness of the divine reality or the *Real*, yet without bringing the worshipper into any actual direct contact with that divine reality. He unpacks this idea (a) philosophically, by employing Kant's distinction between the entity, as it is in itself, and the entity, as it appears in perception, and (b) theologically, by citing what he takes to be a traditional Christian doctrine of divine *ineffability*, which, after an historical and comparative analysis, he takes to be synonymous with his notion of *transcategorical*.

It was only to be expected that the notion of a transcategorical or ineffable entity would invite a range of philosophically penetrating questions as to how such a state of affairs can be. Placed under scrutiny the idea of a transcategorical entity was not one that commended itself to everyone, the primary criticism being that the concept was itself incomprehensible. Hick's initial response to this criticism was disappointing, although he did engage with the issues arising at a later date. For the moment, however, he simply dismissed this engagement with his work as unimportant:

But these are logical pedantries which need not have worried those classical thinkers who have affirmed the ultimate ineffability of the divine nature.<sup>49</sup>

Hick's final chapter in *An Interpretation of Religion* is one where he seeks to tackle not simply the differing but complimentary perspectives in world religion but seemingly irreconcilable or incompatible truth claims. His engagement with the conflicting nature of these truth claims is not of course with a view to adjudicating between them but simply to consider to what extent, if any, this state of affairs militates against his pluralistic hypothesis.

Hick separates these conflicting claims into three categories: (a) Historical truth claims that deal with issues of straightforward historical fact; (b) Trans-historical or cosmological claims about the nature of the universe; and (c) Theological representations of the nature of the divine being.

His overall approach to the issues raised was to minimise or dismiss their problematic nature along the following lines: (a) Great numbers of believers in the modern world no longer consider factual or historical claims to be that upon which faith is grounded. Such articles of faith are increasingly being viewed as mythological in character. (b) Many disputed beliefs are not soteriologically vital and therefore not crucially important. (c) Others require answers which are at presently unknowable or at least unverifiable and perhaps in principle will remain so.

He writes:

---

<sup>49</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

My conclusion, then, is that the differences between the root concepts and experiences of the different religions, their different and often conflicting historical and trans-historical beliefs, their incommensurable mythologies, and the diverse and ramifying belief-systems into which all these are built, are compatible with the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.<sup>50</sup>

### *1.12 Later Years*

Hick retired from Claremont in 1992 at the age of 70 and was to describe his tenure at Claremont as the happiest of his life, blighted only by the death of his youngest son Mike, aged 24, and to a far lesser extent by renewed opposition from a local presbytery. He kept active by attending and participating in philosophical conferences as well as enlarging his collection of antiquarian books, an interest that began in his teenage years. His wife died in 1996 from a heart attack while he himself was in hospital.

Hick continued to write articles and books while engaging with issues such as the relationship between religion and neuroscience yet remaining actively involved in inter-faith dialogue. He kept abreast with developments in the field of philosophy of religion and this particularly so within the evangelical community of philosophers in the USA. Hick viewed it

---

<sup>50</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 375-376.

as somewhat strange that the most incisive work in philosophy of religion was being produced by those in the USA such as Plantinga, whose theological stance was so conservative on the issues to which he felt most antipathy.

If asked the question why Hick exhibited such strong opposition to traditional Christian theological claims the answer is not difficult to find. In his own mind Hick saw not just an historical but a logical and necessary connection between the traditional beliefs of the Church and the many social evils in the world.

Speaking of the doctrine of the deity of Christ he writes:

The effect of this, particularly in the older and stronger version, has been to make Christians feel uniquely privileged in contrast to the non-Christian majority of the human race and accordingly free to patronise them religiously, exploit them economically and dominate them politically. Thus the dogma of the deity of Christ – in conjunction with the aggressive and predatory aspect of human nature – has contributed historically to the evils of colonialism, the destruction of the indigenous civilizations, anti-Semitism, destructive wars of religion and the burning of heretics and witches.<sup>51</sup>

This conviction seemed to grow and not lessen throughout the course of his lifetime. Hick's writing career spanned some 45 years. His works have provoked over 20 books, more than 50 academic dissertations and well over 200 journal articles. Hick's theology was to undergo

---

<sup>51</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 371-372.

radical alterations over the years but his basic religious epistemology was to remain largely the same since the publication of *Faith and Knowledge* in 1957. He viewed Mahatma Gandhi as the greatest influence on his social conscience while Immanuel Kant provided the epistemological insights that he utilised in his pluralistic hypothesis. He also drew upon the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, but not to the extent of his reliance upon Kant.

In 2011 the University of Birmingham established the John Hick Centre for Philosophy of Religion and also awarded him an honorary doctorate of divinity. John Hick died on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2012, aged 90.



## Chapter 2: Epistemology of Religious Experience

### *2.1 The Problem of Definition*

Over the last 40 years or so there has been a sustained and concentrated debate on the nature of evidence within philosophy of religion and it is to this debate that John Hick has made a significant contribution.

The first problem Hick had to tackle was the thorny issue of deciding what elements may rightfully be included in a study of this kind. At first glance it would appear that a simple working definition of 'religion' would suffice.

However Gordon Clark helps us understand why it is difficult to settle upon such a definition from the outset.

He writes:

In order to discover the common element in all religions it would first be necessary to distinguish religious phenomena from all non-religious phenomena. If there were an authoritative list of religions, a student could begin to examine them for a common element. But before the common element is known, how could an authoritative list be compiled? If Lewis Carroll tells Alice to examine all Snarks and find the common nature of the Snark, Alice (at least in her waking moments) would not know whether all the objects before her were Snarks or even whether any of them were. Now we are not in much better a position than Alice would be. In our attempt to find the common nature of religion we believe that Christianity and Islam are religions. But is Hinayana Buddhism a religion? If it is, then a belief in God is not

essential to religion. Should we examine Buddhism, or not? Should we include Buddhism on our list? To answer this question one would first have to show the essential nature of religion and yet this essential nature is the still unknown object of search. It does not help to advise us to begin with a smaller undisputed list. In the first place there is no undisputed list at all. Until religion is known, nothing can be placed on the list. And in the second place even if we had a smaller undisputed list its common elements could not be assumed to be the nature of religion, for with religion (even more than with botany) the common element of a longer list is not likely to be the common element first observed in the shorter list.<sup>52</sup>

Operating within the discipline of cultural anthropology Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Myers write:

Another social institution found in all cultures is religion. Every known society practices some form of religion. What do we mean by religion? The anthropological usage of words often differs from their popular use. To anthropologists the term *religion* refers to the shared beliefs and practices of a society. These beliefs and practices form the doctrines and rituals of the religion.<sup>53</sup>

The difficulty with defining religion in terms of 'society's shared beliefs and practices' in this way is, however, that it seems infinitely elastic and potentially inclusive of many societal elements and groupings not normally associated with religion at all.

---

<sup>52</sup> Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology*, 234.

A similar concern is raised by Alister E. McGrath, for example, in relation to the diluting or stretching of the nomenclature traditionally used in the field of theological and religious studies:

If the term 'salvation' is understood to mean 'some benefit conferred upon or achieved by members of a community, whether individually or corporately', all religions offer 'salvation'. All –and by no means only religions – offer *something*. However, this is such a general statement that that it is devoid of significant theological value. All religions, along with political theories such as Marxism and psychotherapeutic schools such as Rogerian therapy –may legitimately be styled 'salvific'.<sup>54</sup>

However, despite these difficulties the assumption behind Professor Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is that a certain homogenisation of religions and religious experience is possible. He writes:

Our 'practising mystics' have spoken both of mystical experience and of the mystic's practices and disciplines. I should like to discuss the former, the religious experience and its significance, rather than the practices and techniques which serve it. Mystical experience, as our mystics (and others) describe it, does not seem to me to be anything other than first-hand religious experience as such. This is however, I believe

---

<sup>54</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, 234.

the essence of religion....religion consists primarily in experiencing our life in its relation to the Transcendent and living on the basis of that experience.<sup>55</sup>

Once again it has to be stated that Hick has come under sustained criticism for this assertion. Alister E. McGrath, for example, comments:

Earlier we noted the attempts of various liberal writers to treat 'culture' and 'experience' as universals capable of avoiding the particularism which they felt to be such an unacceptable feature of traditional Christian thought. In much the same way 'religion' or the hybrid category of 'religious experience' is introduced as a third potential universal in an attempt to avoid particularity. Each of these three however is simply a pseudo universal notion, deriving what little credibility it possesses from the totalizing agenda of their proponents. This is now especially clear in the case of the category of 'religion', which is widely conceded to be a false category, incapable of bearing the theological strain of the more adventurous and ambitious pluralistic theologies erected upon its spurious foundation.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, McGrath criticises the idea seemingly present throughout Hick's thesis, viz., that religion can be reduced to a single essence and that diverse religions therefore can be subsumed under a single genus.

---

<sup>55</sup>John Hick *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 14.

<sup>56</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, 207.

This attempt to construct and impose a reductionist understanding and definition of religion has also attracted further criticism on the grounds that it represents the imposition of a western imperialistic notion of what religion is.

McGrath comments further:

We must therefore be intensely suspicious of the naïve assumption, common to western students of religion (and ultimately reflecting their culturally conditioned outlook) that 'religion' is a well-defined category, which can be sharply and surgically distinguished from 'culture' as a whole. The fact that classical Greek mythology, Confucianism, Taoism, the diverse religions of India which have been misleadingly brought together under the generic term 'Hinduism', Christianity, totemism, and animism can all be called 'religion' points to this being an alarmingly broad and diffuse category, without any real distinguishing features.<sup>57</sup>

Given the criticism aimed at Hick's homogenising approach it is only fair to point out that Professor Hick does appear to be very aware of the problem of establishing a tight, univocally defined meaning to the word 'religion'.

In fact it is in the light of this that he suggests the employment of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance' as offering a more fruitful approach to the problem.

Speaking of the difficulties inherent in seeking to define 'religion', he writes:

---

<sup>57</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, 209.

Scholars have proposed an immense range of definitions of 'religion' attempting to discriminate between that to which the word does and does not properly apply... all these definitional strategies embody and either reveal or conceal commitments... but Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblance (or, as they have also been called, cluster) concepts has opened up the possibility that 'religion' is of this rather different kind. He took the example of games. They have no common essence. There are no characteristics that every member must have; but nevertheless there are characteristics distributed sporadically and in varying degrees which together distinguish this from a different family. Using this analogy it is I think illuminating to see the different traditions movements and ideologies whose religious character is either generally agreed or responsibly debated, not as exemplifying a common essence but forming a complex continuum of resemblances and differences analogous to those found within a family.<sup>58</sup>

The overall trajectory of Wittgenstein's thinking on this matter sees him take issue with the idea that language-use operates around very strict rules that allow us to state with exactitude the precise meaning of a term e.g. 'games' by establishing what is common to all the activities designated as such. Wittgenstein rejects the notion that words acquire their meaning either from the thoughts of the person who voices them, or by simply standing for, and corresponding to, objects in reality. Contrary to this, he points out that some words do not have a single essence present in the definition. As an example of this he

---

<sup>58</sup> John Hick. *An Interpretation of Religion*, 3-4.

selects the word 'game' and demonstrates that, despite the varied referents to which the word is applied, it is impossible to identify a single thing that is common to all uses of the word, and so establish the essence of what a 'game' actually is. Wittgenstein likens this to the notion of 'family resemblance', according to which family members resemble one another, not by means of one single trait, but actually by means of a variety of traits shared by some, yet not all, members of the family.

To illustrate this we may consider a family of four siblings: Alison, Murdo, Carol and Norman:

- > Alison, Carol and Murdo all have blonde hair, while Norman has black hair.
- > Alison and Murdo both have large ears, but Norman and Carol have small ears.
- > Murdo, Norman and Carol have blue eyes, but Alison has brown eyes.
- > Norman and Alison have pronounced cheek bones, but Carol and Murdo have sunken cheek bones.

Although, from the same family, and resembling each other in some way, there is no common characteristic that all possess, yet there are family traits that are seen in multiple members of the family. Now it is this notion of family resemblance that Wittgenstein adopts and applies to language usage, suggesting that the meaning of some words is established by means of an identical procedure. Wittgenstein, therefore, advocates the idea of 'family resemblance' as the better analogy, by which is meant examining and tracing the multifarious uses of a word as it relates in a variety of contexts. With such an emphasis the strict boundaries that are normally sought to establish the form of a thing, become less

important than the typical characteristics exhibited by a thing. Thus when such an approach is applied to the word usage e.g. of religious experience and religion, it does not provide us with an exact definition of religion or religious experience, but rather confirms typical family characteristics of the same. For example, we may affirm that all religions speak in terms of salvation, and thus establish a commonality between them. However in order to appreciate the particulars of salvation as it is understood within each specific religion, we must, like Wittgenstein, explore the way the word is used within the religious community's own language game.

## *2.2 The Rationality of Religious Belief*

While Hick is best known for his pluralistic thesis, it is his work on (a) the structure, nature and warrant of faith, and (b) the relationship of faith to reason, that has drawn appreciation from other philosophers, including many who share a common aversion to his revised theological views. Hick was later to receive support for this approach to the epistemology of faith from virtue epistemologists such as Plantinga, who associated the justification of knowledge with properly functioning intellectual faculties in an appropriate environment. However, this "Reformed Epistemology" that came to be associated with names such as Alvin Plantinga (University of Notre Dame), Nicholas Wolterstorff (Yale University) and William Alston (Michigan, Illinois, and Syracuse) was still in its infancy when Hick was working towards the basics of his apologetic. Hick did not set out to prove or argue the probability of God's existence, but rather to establish the epistemic right of rational beings to view their religious experience as trustworthy and reliable.



He writes:

The role of philosophical argument is not to prove or to probabilify God's existence but to establish our right as rational beings to trust our religious experience, as we trust other modes of experience except in each case where we have good reason to doubt them.<sup>59</sup>

Again he writes:

We shall not be asking directly whether A's 'experience of existing in the presence of God' is genuine but rather whether it is rational for A to trust his or her experience as veridical and to behave on the basis of it. It is thus evident that when we proceed to speak in this chapter of the rationality of belief in God the reference is to the rationality of the believing not of what is believed. A proposition believed can be true or false: it is the believing of it that is rational or irrational.<sup>60</sup>

Thus he has as his focus the justification and provision of a warrant for the believer's claim to have knowledge of God, and not simply unwarranted belief in God that just happened to be true. The distinction between knowledge and mere belief can be elucidated by means of the following example.

A person may believe that he will encounter a black dog at 3pm the next day on a certain street, and what he believes actually happens. However although the man's belief turned

---

<sup>59</sup> John Hick, *An Autobiography*, 314.

<sup>60</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 213.

out to be true it is also the case that he had no actual grounds for such a belief and therefore could not genuinely have known that the event would take place. What the man required for his belief to be converted into knowledge was some sort of further warrant that justified his believing in the first instance.

Traditionally, epistemology has looked to the quality of the reasons given as the grounds for converting true beliefs into knowledge. Allied to this requirement is the “ethics of belief” concerning one’s responsibility to knowledge and within this scheme is a deontological element that requires a person to believe only when a high level of certainty prevails. To believe otherwise, it was asserted, is morally wrong.

### *2.3 Rejection of Foundationalism*

The philosophical world in which Hick’s views were forming was largely committed at this level to what is known as “Classical Foundationalism.” Foundationalism, as the name suggests, views knowledge as a system, or pyramid structure, built upon first principles, or immediately justified beliefs. These beliefs within the structure or system can be divided into two types. The first category of beliefs, labelled as “basic” or “foundational” are thought to possess such a degree of certainty as to require no evidence or argument.

The beliefs comprising the second category, or super-structure, derive their justification from these immediately justified beliefs in the first category. The most important characteristic, then, of a basic belief, is that its justification is not inferred from any other propositions. Basic beliefs are thus analogous to the axioms of a geometric system.

Support for this structure of epistemic justification was itself buttressed by the recognition that the only alternative to immediately justified beliefs seemed to be either a circular argument, or one characterised by an infinite regress. In other words, justification, it was argued, must terminate somewhere for knowledge to be known, and classical foundationalism seemed to offer the best solution to this problem.

In his article on '*Empirical Knowledge*' in *Epistemology: An Anthology* Laurence Bonjour, quoting Antony Quintin, provides an excellent summary:

If any beliefs are to be justified at all...there must be some terminal beliefs that do not owe their credibility to others. For a belief to be justified it is not enough for it to be accepted, let alone merely entertained: there must also be good reason for accepting it. Furthermore for an inferential belief to be justified the beliefs that support it must be justified themselves. There must, therefore, be a kind of belief that does not owe its justification to the support provided by others. Unless this were so no belief would be justified at all, for to justify any belief would require the antecedent justification of an infinite series of beliefs. The terminal...beliefs that are needed to bring regress of justification to a stop need not be strictly self-evident in the sense that they somehow justify themselves. All that is needed is that they should not owe their justification to any other beliefs.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Laurence Bonjour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" in Ernest Sosa and Jaegwon Kim, eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 261-271.

Concerning the importance and longevity of classical foundationalism within the field of epistemology, Norman Geisler comments:

This argument has had a grip on epistemologists throughout the history of philosophy.<sup>62</sup>

And Alvin Plantinga:

This assumption is part of a larger picture, a total way of thinking of the main questions of epistemology which has come to be to be called classical foundationalism. Like everyone else I imbibed this picture with my mother's milk.<sup>63</sup>

Now at first glance this appears to be a way of looking at things most suitable for Hick, whose doctrine of mystical experience functions as his immediately justified first principle. However, in classical foundationalism religious beliefs were not ascribed the status of basic beliefs. In order to hold to belief in the existence of God, therefore, what was required was a prior supporting foundational belief that rendered e.g. theism probable. In short, religious belief needed proof, evidence, or argument reliably deduced or inferred from some basic truth that was itself self-evident, a priori or incorrigible. In the case of rationalism this would consist in demonstrations of pure reason, or within empiricism the testimony of incontrovertible experience. Conversely, if one could not produce an argument for God's existence that conforms to such criteria, then it would be flouting one's epistemic duty to continue to hold to theistic belief, and to do so would be deemed irrational. For these

---

<sup>62</sup> Norman Geisler and Paul Feinberg, Paul D. *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*, 155.

<sup>63</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly lived," in Kelly James Clark, ed., *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journey of 11 Leading Thinkers*, 74.

reasons philosophers of religion concentrated their efforts on defending, developing and explicating traditional arguments for God's existence, or attempting to develop new ones, and in so doing tacitly accepted that the burden of proof lay with the theist.

The validity of approaching the question of the rationality of theistic beliefs in terms of argument for and against God's existence, and this on premises and by procedures, that could not be called into question, was for the most part considered as the valid operating methodology by Christian philosophers. Indeed, the challenge of producing theistic arguments for the existence of God, and thus conforming to the rigid requirements of foundationalism, was not altogether unfruitful, although these arguments took various forms. For example, Alvin Plantinga, prior to the development of his work on belief in God as properly basic, sought to demonstrate that belief in "other minds"<sup>64</sup> and "belief in God" were in the same epistemological boat. Christian philosopher, Gordon Clark, rejected traditional theistic arguments as invalid but nonetheless argued that the structure of our religious knowledge should be understood according to the model of Euclidean geometry, with its basic axioms and derived theorems.<sup>65</sup> Cornelius Van Til advanced a form of transcendental presuppositionalism, arguing that the existence of God alone provided the preconditions of intelligibility, and that all other presuppositional starting points fail to do so.<sup>66</sup> Although these arguments were quite distinct in terms of their logical form and

---

<sup>64</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*.

<sup>65</sup> Gordon Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*.

<sup>66</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defence of the Faith*.

accompanying truth- tests they nonetheless conformed to the strictures that required existence of God to be established by means of a rational and persuasive argument.

John Hick's epistemology was of a different character altogether, insofar as he sought to establish that, (a) knowledge of God could be legitimately viewed as a basic belief, and (b) religious experience itself was sufficient to yield this knowledge. Hick's religious epistemology was grounded, therefore, in the phenomena of religious experience, and not on any traditional argument for God's existence.

The notion of *experience* maybe best understood as a person's state of consciousness when aware of something apart from himself. This may be a subjective awareness such as self-consciousness i.e. when the subject views himself as an object and understands that he is doing so, or awareness of something outside of himself. In both cases the actual structure of the experience involves three components: (a) the individual (b) the object of knowledge and (c) the act of knowing. A religious experience is one that is characterised by an awareness or consciousness of God or The Transcendent, but may be schematised differently by varying schools of thought.

Thus Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), grounding religious knowledge in experience, nonetheless understood the nature and characteristics of that experience to be different.

---

Norman Geisler succinctly clarifies the difference. He writes:

The central difference in their starting points was noted by Otto. Schleiermacher had begun with the feeling of dependence and moved from there to "God." For Otto the "Holy" is taken as the primary datum and a feeling of dependence results from this. The latter works from the top down, we may say; and the former works from the bottom up.<sup>67</sup>

Many philosophers, however, consider it too limiting to apply the term "religious" only to such experiences as would be classed as "mystical" or "numinous." C. Stephen Evans, for example, prefers to speak of the "religious dimension of experience" as opposed to "religious experiences" and comments in the following way:

I believe that this dimension of experience figures heavily in the classical theistic arguments for God's existence. The person who finds the *cosmological argument* convincing is the person who experiences the finite objects in the world (and herself) as radically contingent, and, crying out for their dependence on a higher power. The person who finds the *teleological argument* convincing is the person who experiences nature as an orderly purposeful reality where the good and beauty which are realised are no accident. The person who finds the *moral argument* convincing is the person who perceives certain situations as placing him under

---

<sup>67</sup> Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 72-73.

objective obligation and who interprets “being obligated” as a relation between finite persons and a supreme Person.<sup>68</sup>

#### *2.4 Mystical Experience as Cognition*

John Hick has as his own basic foundation, then: the phenomena of religious *mystical experience* which he understands to be the very essence of religion. This he takes to be a consciousness of the Transcendent, not based upon second hand reporting but on direct existential awareness. As such there may be varying degrees of awareness of the Transcendent and also many forms which this consciousness takes. Within his epistemological scheme Hick does not believe that the person who has such an experience requires any further justification for his belief in God because the very experience itself entails the existence of God and is self-authenticating. He writes:

Those who participate in the realm of religious experience are as rational people fully entitled to trust it.<sup>69</sup>

As previously mentioned, the notion of religious experience as providing a warrant for religious belief, has been developed in different directions by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga<sup>70</sup>, William Alston<sup>71</sup> and Keith Yandell.<sup>72</sup> Hick seeks further support for his assertion

---

<sup>68</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion-Thinking about Faith*, 78.

<sup>69</sup> John Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt-Dialogues on Religion and Reason*, 54.

<sup>70</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolstertorff (eds.) *Faith and Rationality*.



that religious experience should be trusted as a source of knowledge, by citing the *principle of credulity*, which states that a person's claim to perceive or experience something is *prima facie* justified, unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary. The principle of credulity is thus the assertion based on observation that our experience is normally reliable, and that if we experience X then this experience provides evidence that X exists. He writes:

It is a basic principle of life that we trust and act upon our experience except where we have reason to distrust it.<sup>73</sup>

Other philosophers provide support for Hick's citation of this principle.

Richard Swinburne states it in the following way:

Now it is a basic principle of rationality which I call the principle of credulity, that we ought to believe that things are as they seem to be (in the epistemic sense) unless and until we have evidence that we are mistaken.<sup>74</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff comments:

A person is rationally justified in believing a certain proposition that he does believe unless he has adequate reason to cease from believing it. Our beliefs are rational unless we have reason for refraining; they are not non-rational unless we have

<sup>71</sup> William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*.

<sup>72</sup> Keith E. Yandel, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*.

<sup>73</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 173.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Is there a God?*, 131-132.

reason *for* believing. They are innocent until proved guilty, not guilty until proven innocent.<sup>75</sup>

William Alston along similar lines adds:

Are mystical experiences ever or significantly often genuine experiences of God?  
 ...The most important philosophical positive reason is this. Any supposition that one perceives something to be the case – that there is a zebra in front of one, or that God is strengthening one – is *prima facie* justified. That is, one is justified in supposing this unless there are strong enough reasons to the contrary. In the zebra case this would include reasons for thinking that there is no zebra in the vicinity and reasons for supposing oneself to be subject to hallucinations because of some drug. According to this position, beliefs formed on the basis of experience possess an initial credibility by virtue of their origin. They are innocent until proven guilty.<sup>76</sup>

Opponents of the notion of religious or mystical experience as a source of knowledge supported by the principle of credulity have tended to emphasise the apparent differences between *mystical or religious experience*, and *sense experience*. Sense experience generates sense perceptual reports that are empirical in nature and subject to some sort of further verification whereas religious or mystical experience, it is claimed, being non-empirical apparently provides no test for any further verification.

---

<sup>75</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolstertorff (eds.) *Faith and Rationality*, 163.

<sup>76</sup> William Alston, "Why should there not be experience of God?" in Brian Davies ed. *Philosophy of Religion*, 384.

The question however is not whether there are differences between these two forms of perception but whether the differences are epistemically relevant. Why should it be the case that only perceptual truth claims substantiated by direct empirical observation be deemed veridical in character? What reason can be given for pronouncing sensory perception as a necessary condition for access to objective reality? A great deal of knowledge is grounded on something other than sensory perception. For example, laws of logic and knowledge of one's inner state of mind. If God as the object of knowledge is understood not to be either visible or material then why would one require some form of truth test formulated for objects subject to direct empirical observation to apply?

William Alston offers a rebuttal along these lines:

The best response of the mystic is to charge the critic with *epistemic imperialism* by subjecting the outputs of one belief-forming practise to the requirements of another<sup>77</sup>.

Indeed a counter case can be made for the claim that religious perception and sensory perception share more points of coincidence than divergence.

J. P. Moreland gives voice to this view when stating:

---

<sup>77</sup> William Alston, "Why should there not be experience of God?" in Brian Davies ed. *Philosophy of Religion*, 385.

There are several reasons for holding that there is a close analogy between sensory perception and numinous religious perception. And since we know that the former is usually veridical there is good reason to take the latter as usually veridical.<sup>78</sup>

John Hick, contrasting experience with propositional revelation, states:

I therefore want to explore the possibility that cognition of God by faith is more like perceiving something, even perceiving a physical object that is present before us, than it is like believing a statement about some absent object, whether because the statement has been proved to us or because we want to believe it. The hypothesis that we want to consider is not that religious faith *is* sense perception but that as a form of cognition by acquaintance it is *more like* sense perception than propositional belief.<sup>79</sup>

And again:

My conclusion, then, is that the obvious differences between sensory and religious experience do not constitute a valid reason to rule out the latter as delusory. It is entirely reasonable, rational, and sane for those who participate in what is apparently an awareness of the Transcendent to believe, and to base their lives on the belief, that in living as physical beings within a natural world we are at the same

---

<sup>78</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 235.

<sup>79</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 38.

time living in relation to a transcendent-and-immanent reality whose presence changes the meaning for us of everything that we do and that happens to us.<sup>80</sup>

For Hick religious experience functioned as a foundational and basic self- authenticating claim. He says:

Our ordinary daily activity presupposes a general trust in the veridical character of perceptual experience... that is to say we are so constituted that we cannot help believing and living in terms of the objective reality of the perceived world.<sup>81</sup>

## *2.5 Epistemological Structure*

Now according to Hick the same epistemological structure we bring to bear on the process of knowing religiously applies to all of our cognising activity, irrespective of the actual objects of knowledge. All knowledge for Hick begins with experience and, as previously stated, experience may be thought of as the state of consciousness that an individual has who is aware of something outside of or within himself. However, according to Hick the human mind is not passive when experiencing an awareness of the world, but rather filters and organises the data received, by imposing order and meaning upon it, and this, by means of concepts already present in or to the mind. He writes:

---

<sup>80</sup> John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science-Religious Experience Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, 145.

<sup>81</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 213.

The basic fact that the mind imposes order and meaning upon the data it receives is true at all levels of awareness, physical, moral, aesthetic and religious.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, the function of the mind is inseparable from the intelligibility and objective reality of the universe, and all knowledge is the human interpretation of this objective reality. In order to illustrate this feature that is common to all acts of knowing, Hick draws upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's use of puzzle pictures, such as Jarrow's duck-rabbit explaining the notion of "seeing as" and likens this to his own conception of "experiencing as".

Hick further sets forth the idea that this activity of interpretation, which gives rise to knowledge, operates at four levels. *Natural Knowledge* encompasses our awareness of e.g. physical objects such as trees and motorcycles. No real ambiguity exists concerning our awareness and interpretation of such things.

*Moral Judgements* which are ethical in character are more complex as objects of knowledge than natural knowledge, and a third category i.e. *Aesthetic Taste*, admits of a broader ambiguity with a wider range of opinion as to the value or worth of, for example, a work of art. The fourth level of knowledge is that of *Religious Faith*, which, because of the ambiguous nature of the universe, is less coercive as an object of knowledge, but of course equally valid to those to whom this interpretation is persuasive.

---

<sup>82</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 39.

What distinguishes one level of knowledge from another is the greater or lesser degree of cognitive freedom exercised in relation to it. Hick writes:

Our cognitive freedom increases in relation to the value-laden aspects of our environment<sup>83</sup>

With respect to God as the object of religious knowledge Hick insists that an additional factor is present. Within the human constitution there is an aspect of our being that is “in tune” with God, and although this has many religious labels we may refer to this phenomenon as “the image of God.” He writes:

It is this aspect of our being that is affected by the Ultimately Real to the extent that we are open to that reality.<sup>84</sup>

Hick seemed to follow what he understood to be the teaching of Irenaeus that the “image of God” refers to that which is our rational moral personhood, and the “likeness of God” as that which refers to the person’s “complete spiritual transformation”.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 41.

<sup>84</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 47.

<sup>85</sup> John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, 24.

## 2.6 *The Critical Realist Principle*

At this point it is necessary to understand that Hick's correlation between the interpretative function of the mind and God as an object of knowledge, is slightly different than a common sense understanding of that experience. When Hick speaks of an objective reality that can be known, he nonetheless insists that this reality as an object of knowledge cannot be known directly. We know the object of knowledge only as it appears i.e. as already interpreted and structured by the categories of thought imposed upon the object by the human mind. These religious categories are not universal and invariable, but are culture-relative and consist of the religious ideas that are brought to bear upon the basic awareness of the transcendent.

Thus while there is a subject/object distinction, both subjectivity and objectivity exist only in relation to the knowing subject and within the mind. In some ways therefore this is not dissimilar to the structure of self-conscious awareness where the subject views itself as an object, and understands that it is doing so. He writes:

The critical realist principle – that there are realities external to us but that we are never aware of them as they are in themselves, but always as they appear to us with our particular cognitive machinery and conceptual resources – is thus a vital clue to understanding what is happening in the different forms of religious experience.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 47.



This epistemological scheme is not original to Hick but is drawn from his lifelong study of Immanuel Kant. Prior to Kant, philosophers had assumed and argued that human cognition is such that it conforms to the objects of knowledge. Kant's proposal was to assume the opposite i.e. that the objects conform to the conditions of cognition. He does not deny that all knowledge begins with experience but rather insists that it does not arise out of experience. Empirical knowledge is resultant upon sensory impressions and something the mind contributes to this. The task Kant set himself was that of distinguishing the *a priori* factors or knowledge that is independent of all sense impression from the *a posteriori* contributions of sense.

According then to Kant the way we acquire or generate knowledge by means of cognition is that the human mind engages with the phenomenal world of appearances by structuring the phenomena we perceive in accordance with certain principles or categories. In other words, for something to be an object of knowledge it has to conform to the categories of the mind. Kant further, distinguished the *phenomenal world* from the *noumenal world* and explained such in the following way. The phenomenal world is the realm of sense experience or appearances and the noumenal world is the world as it actually is or as it is in itself. Things in themselves are things as they exist independently of human cognition, and appearances are things that exist as contents or objects of sensible representations. Thus from the standpoint of the enquirer we have cognition only of the phenomenal world of appearances but not of the noumenal world of the things in themselves. However, while we cannot know the noumenal we can *postulate* the noumenal to account for the appearances, or phenomenal world, we experience, or are confronted with. Whether Kant is making an ontological (two world) distinction here or an epistemological (two aspect) distinction one is

a matter of live debate among Kantian scholars.<sup>87</sup> The main difference between Kant and Hick is that categories within Kant's epistemology are universal and invariable but Hick's, being religious in nature, are culture-relative.

---

<sup>87</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson and Jordan Bell, *Kant and Theology*, 19.

## Chapter 3: Who or What is God?

### 3.1 God as Ineffable

While Hick's primary concern is to establish the epistemic right of believers to trust their experience of God, the question of who or what God is must now be addressed. For John Hick there exists an ultimate, but directly unknowable, reality commonly designated "God" or "Ultimate Reality" by religious devotees. This God is unknowable in the sense that the ultimate reality's inner nature is beyond the reach of human conceptual categories and linguistic systems. Hick's view corresponds to the statement issued on 15th November 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council convened by Pope Innocent III where it was confessed that there is only one true God, eternal and immeasurable, almighty, unchangeable, incomprehensible and *ineffable*.

Keith Yandell unpacks the idea of ineffable:

The claim that something is ineffable is a strong claim: it says that something is inexpressible, uncapturable in language, aconceptual, equidistant from all concepts, something about which nothing true or false can be said.<sup>88</sup>

Gordon Kaufman represents this view of things along the following lines:

The real reference for "God" is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown – X, a mere limiting idea with no content. It stands for the fact that God transcends our knowledge in

---

<sup>88</sup> Keith E. Yandel, *Christianity and Philosophy*, 104.

modes and in ways of which we can never be aware and of which we have no inkling. God is ultimately profound Mystery and utterly escapes or every effort to grasp or comprehend him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable<sup>89</sup>

The term Hick employs to describe the object of our worship is the Ultimate Real. This Ultimate Real is “*transcategorical*” or “*ineffable*” and the various world faiths with their seeming contradictory beliefs systems are but differing yet complimentary responses to this one ultimate reality as it impacts us by means of a transcendent experience.

Hick in his study of historical Christianity gradually came to identify the spirituality of mysticism as a fruitful field of enquiry, which to a greater or lesser extent supported his contention that God is ineffable. He noticed that prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystics typically produced works of biblical exegesis in which they sought to bring out the mystical meaning latent in the texts of scripture, but that this emphasis progressively shifted to the reporting of mystical-experiential encounters with God, the result of which was not a unity of being, but a union of wills as the human is fully conformed to the divine. Hick was particularly taken with the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, whose writings provide support for his own emphasis upon God as unknowable.

Concerning the corpus of his works he states:

---

<sup>89</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 95.

They have probably been more influential than any other within the Christian tradition apart from St. Paul... such was his influence that he was cited as an authority by Aquinas some 1700 times.<sup>90</sup>

Mystics emphasised the reality of religious experience but the nature of the experience was increasingly indescribable the closer one approximated to union with or awareness of the divine. Hick, placing this doctrine of the Ultimate Real within the tradition of historical mystical theology, breaks new ground in taking the implication of God's ineffability to what he understands to be a more radical though logical conclusion:

I am not fond of the word 'ineffable' and prefer 'transcategorical', meaning beyond the range of our human systems or concepts or mental categories. Theologians have nearly always taken the ultimate divine ineffability or transcategoriality for granted though usually without taking its implications to their logical conclusion. Augustine, for example, about a century before Pseudo-Dionysius said that God transcends even the mind but did not develop this further. But Dionysius –or Denys, to give him a more user friendly name – makes the divine ineffability central and begins at least to struggle with its implications. In his central work, *The Mystical Theology*, he says in every way he can think that God is utterly and totally transcategorical. God is indescribable, beyond all being and knowledge.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science-Religious Experience Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 5.

This notion of God or gods as excessively transcendent to the point of being scarcely knowable was prevalent in the thinking of Plato, Philo and in particular enjoyed a central place in the teachings of Gnosticism. Herman Bavinck traces the influence of this mystical strand as one that fed into the thinking of the early Greek Church Fathers, Augustine in the West, and Pseudo-Dionysius, before being affirmed at a later date (but to a lesser extent) by the Scholastics. Charting these developments through the course of Church history, he writes:

Christian theology made the idea of God's incomprehensibility and unknowability its point of departure: Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Origen, Eusebius, Augustine, John of Damascus, and many others held agnostic or semi-agnostic views.<sup>92</sup>

Confirming Hick's reading of Pseudo-Dionysius he writes:

Pseudo-Dionysius (appealed to by John of Damascus) and Scotus Erigena held views concerning God's being, which were even more agnostic. The Areopagite taught that there is no concept, expression or word by which God's being can be indicated. Accordingly, whenever we wish to designate God we use metaphorical language. He is "supersubstantial infinity, supermental unity" etc. We cannot form a conception of that unitary, unknown being, transcendent above all being, above goodness, above every name and word and thought.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 21.

<sup>93</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 22.

Bavinck is not himself endorsing this view, for commenting upon God's incomprehensibility he writes:

Holy Scripture corroborates this as strongly as possible; yet it presents a doctrine concerning God which maintains his knowability.<sup>94</sup>

Hick, therefore, by means of his engagement with Christian mystics and other spiritual devotees from world religions, arrives at the point where the application of human concepts to God is considered by him to be a category mistake. God does have an inner nature, according to Hick, but we are unable to source any information about this within the range of our human conceptual resources.

The concept of ineffability is one that approximates to, but is quite distinct from, a cluster of related emphases attached to theological enquiry, such as the following.

### *3.2 God as Transcendent*

The first idea that seems naturally to associate itself with God as ineffable is that of “*transcendence*”, which although conceptually quite distinct is at times used in such a way as to suggest that a writer actually has the notion of “ineffable” in mind. Lorant Hegedus provides a summary of how the doctrine of God's transcendence has come to be understood by many theologians and philosophers of religion operating within the Christian tradition. He writes:

---

<sup>94</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 14.

Even the shortest summary must indicate the following aspects and forms: 1) The *ontological* form of transcendence is the otherness of God's existence, which makes it discontinuous with our own: he as Creator and New Creator is in 'infinite qualitative difference' from the creatures that are in need of salvation (Kierkegaard). 2) The *linguistic* form of transcendence means the ineffability, or rather unnameability of God, which declares his absolute sovereignty because without a name for a person it is impossible to gain power over him in the sense of the revelation of the Old Testament. 3) The *moral* form of transcendence is the holiness of God who is perfectly just, good and the overflowing fountain of 'goodness'. 4) The *epistemological* form of transcendence is God's incomprehensibility. In mysticism this means the total unknowability of the transcendent God. In a theology on biblical foundations it is combined with a doctrine of revelation: 'The secret things belong to... God, but the things that are revealed belong to us' (Deut.29:29). In the first place the believer knows how incomprehensible is the God who reveals himself. 5) The *logical* form of transcendence appears in the threefold variety in the history of theology. In the *via negativa*, it is affirmed that God, who lives in inaccessible light, can be recognised only by negations of every finite attribute and attitude of earthly life. The *via analogical* speaks about the transcendent God by means of similarity-in-difference of God and his creatures. The language of paradox endeavours to combine the insights of the other two.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup>Lorant Hegedus, *A Study in the Concept of Transcendence in Contemporary German Theology*, 4-5.



The transcendence of God has thus come to be understood by theologians and philosophers of religion as a term which encapsulates but is not limited to such truths as God's exaltation and mysteriousness. It seeks to convey the idea of God's being over and beyond the created order although the extent to which he is understood to be so can vary greatly in world religion. However, taken to an extreme God's transcendence has become almost synonymous with the idea of ineffability.

John Frame commenting upon this writes:

The transcendence of God (His exaltation, His mysteriousness) has been understood as God's being infinitely removed from the creation, being so far from us, so "wholly other" and "wholly hidden" that we can have no knowledge of him and can make no true statements about Him. Such a god, therefore, has not revealed – and perhaps cannot reveal – himself to us. He is locked out of human life, so that for all practical purposes we become our own gods. God says nothing to us and we have no responsibilities to Him.<sup>96</sup>

This exposition of God's transcendent "otherness" within Christian thought requires another perspective which is perhaps more true to how the idea is used in Scripture. John Frame comments:

It is not biblical therefore to interpret God's transcendence to mean merely that he is located somewhere far away in heaven. That may be part of the thrust of the

---

<sup>96</sup> John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 13.

terms “Most High,” “exalted” and “lifted up” but there must be more to it. What is the additional content? We should, I think, see these expressions primarily as describing God’s royal dignity. He is “exalted,” not mainly as someone living far beyond the earth but as one who sits on a throne. The expressions of transcendence refer to God’s rule, his Kingship, his lordship... so the transcendence of God is best understood not primarily as a spatial concept but as a reference to God’s kingship.<sup>97</sup>

### *3.3 God as Incomprehensible*

The second idea that seems naturally to associate itself with God as ineffable is that of “*incomprehensible*”, although theologians have generally found the formulating of any precise distinction between God’s incomprehensibility and his knowability to be a complex task. Indeed, as John Frame has stated, the very notion of God as incomprehensible is itself a problem for us. He writes:

But we must remember that the concept of incomprehensibility is self-referential, that is, if God is incomprehensible then even His incomprehensibility is incomprehensible. We can no more give an exhaustive explanation of God’s incomprehensibility than we can give of God’s eternity, infinity, righteousness or love.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> John H Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 105-106.

<sup>98</sup> John H Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 25

The notion of God as one who is *incomprehensible* maybe taken to mean that our knowledge of God never expands nor indeed can do so to the point of knowing God fully or exhaustively. In other words, we can never know God as precisely as he knows himself. Nonetheless within this understanding there is room for the twin claim that we can know, and know truly, a great deal about God, and that this knowledge is resultant upon God choosing to engage in acts of self-disclosure. God is free to reveal himself to us and this revelation is intended to communicate truths about himself to us that can be understood.

### 3.4 *The Essence of God*

The discussion on what may and may not be known of God has at times encompassed a range of considerations that seem broadly supportive of the overall trajectory of Hick's thinking on God as one who is ineffable. For example, can we know *God in himself* or do we know him in limited fashion only *in relation to us*?

Even Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck are not always consistent in their wrestling with this issue. So, for example, he states categorically:

There is no knowledge of God *as he is in himself*.<sup>99</sup>

However at a later stage of his book he distinguishes his discussion of the Trinity from his discussion of God's decrees by stating the following:

Thus far we have dealt with God's being *as it is in itself*<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 32.

Now it may be at this point that Bavinck is distinguishing between the ontological trinity, which focuses upon who God is, and the economical trinity, the focus of which is upon what God does. Taken together, these two terms present the paradox of the Trinity: the Father, Son and Spirit share one nature, but they are different Persons and have different roles. However despite the distinction, not every theologian finds the notion of “God in himself”, to be a helpful one.<sup>101</sup> For those who do, it is generally taken to refer to the *essence* of God, which is understood as that essential quality which makes God what he is and without which he would cease to be. However, once again the attempt to isolate and identify that which is God’s essence is problematic. How, then, can we establish what factors about God constitute his essence?

One approach has been to seek to establish the essence of God by identifying those attributes which are essential to God’s ontology from those which are not. Strip away the non-essential attributes, and the end product will be those which define his essential nature.

All this seems fairly straightforward providing the attributes are viewed as “parts of God” rather than “perspectives upon God”, and that some sort of criterion is established to help distinguish essential from non-essential attributes.

---

<sup>100</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 337.

<sup>101</sup> John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 32.

However, as Millard Erickson has outlined, the relationship of God to his attributes is itself a complex issue, since it raises the question as to whether God possesses his attributes, or are the attributes themselves in part or whole expressive of God's essential nature?

Noting several different and possible conceptions of God's relationship to his attributes he writes:

These can be put in popular form by noting several models. (1) *The pincushion model*. This is the view that God has an essence or being which is unknown to us and several attributes that attach like pins stuck to a pincushion. They are not the essence of God. They are logically distinguishable from God's nature and from his other attributes. (2) *The bundle or building model*. This says that God is a composite of his attributes. They are like a bundle of sticks bound together or perhaps like the bricks that make up a wall. They are all distinct from one another, but together they form the entirety, the bundle or the wall. God is his attributes but he is not those individually but collectively. (3) *The facets or diamond model*. On this model the essence of God is not something hidden beneath the attributes. The essence of God is unitary. The attributes are not really separate from one another either. They are simply facets, different ways of viewing his nature in relation to different perspectives.<sup>102</sup>

Another perspective is one that defines God in terms of his attributes. God *is* his essence and when we know his attributes we know him. This is not to say that we can know him

---

<sup>102</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes*, 211-212.

exhaustively but rather what we do know of him we know truly. If God were to be dispossessed of any attribute this would not clarify his essence but would rather alter his essence and he would cease to be whatever he had been up until that point. The view that God is identical with his attributes or properties and that his essence is indivisible in the sense that his attributes are not parts of his nature is identified theologically as the doctrine of “God’s simplicity.” This view has enjoyed a broad base of support throughout the history of Christian theology, although it has been subject to criticism by others such as, for example, Alvin Plantinga<sup>103</sup> and Ronald Nash.<sup>104</sup> Indeed the debate over God’s simplicity is not a new one but formed part of a larger dispute in medieval times between the realists and the nominalists over the issue of universals, which itself was the result of the teaching of Plato with regards to forms or ideas.<sup>105</sup> One contemporary objection to the doctrine of simplicity has been framed in the following way:

If God is identical with each of his properties, then, since each of his properties is a property, he is a property – a self-exemplifying property. Accordingly, God has just one property: himself. This view is subject to a difficulty both obvious and overwhelming. No property could have created the world; no property could be

---

<sup>103</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*

<sup>104</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God*, 85-97.

<sup>105</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God*, 90-91.

omniscient, or indeed, know anything at all. If God is a property then he isn't a person but a mere abstract object; he has no knowledge, awareness, power, love or *life. So taken the simplicity doctrine seems an utter mistake.*<sup>106</sup>

It must be conceded at the outset that if God is a property, then indeed he cannot be a person. However, in Christian theism God is a person and not simply a collection of abstract attributes. Is it not better to understand the attributes as a way of describing him as a person, in the same way we employ attributes, virtues, or properties to describe other persons? This would certainly be the view of God taken by those whose worship of God is recorded in the Bible. When people praise God for his love and mercy, for example, they are not under the impression they are directing this adulation to an abstract attribute which resides in God. Rather they are praising God as a personal relational being whose character reflects mercy and love, answering the question, what kind of person is he? Carl F.H. Henry provides a summary of this position:

Evangelical theology insists on the simplicity of God. By this it means that God is not compounded of parts: he is not a collection of perfections but rather a living centre of activity pervasively characterised by all his distinctive perfections. The divine attributes are neither additions to the divine essence nor qualities pieced together to make a compound...God's variety of attributes does not conflict with God's simplicity because his simplicity is what comprises the fullness of divine life.<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.

<sup>107</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* vol. 5, 131.

Thus for Hick:

God... cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of these descriptive terms apply literally to the un-experienceable reality that underlies that realm.<sup>108</sup>

In anticipation of the objection that such an analysis reduces God to a *tabula rasa* he writes:

It is worth stressing that the divine ineffability does not entail that the ultimate reality which we are calling God is an empty blank, but rather that God's inner nature is beyond the range of our human resources.<sup>109</sup>

Strangely enough, Hick's assertion that God is ineffable, and that we can only know what properties he does *not* have, seems to involve something of a contradiction.

Thomas Morris writes:

To claim that God escapes characterisation by most substantive informative human concepts is to make a fairly weighty claim which itself seems to imply or presuppose some pretty important knowledge about God. How can we ever be justified in saying what something is not unless we have a sense of what it is? This one question reveals the weakness endemic to any severely or exclusively negative theology.

---

<sup>108</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 350.

<sup>109</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God?*, 8.



Rational denial seems clearly to presuppose rational affirmation. Knowledge of what something is not seems to be based upon knowledge of what to some extent it is.<sup>110</sup>

This idea of ineffability as applied to God has come in for a great deal of scrutiny from other philosophers, some of whom regard the whole thesis as wanting and incoherent. Hick consistently responded to such analysis of his thesis by dismissing it.

However, contemporary philosophical discussions on ineffability concentrate upon the very area that Hick seems reluctant to ascribe any real importance to.

Keith Yandell asserts:

Without some restriction being made on it –that is, in its pure and pristine state – the thesis that something is ineffable simply is contradictory, and so false. To put the objection in different language if some proposition is true of some item, then concepts –namely those expressed by the sentence that expresses this proposition – apply to this item. The truth of God as *ineffable* requires what it forbids – it is true only if those concepts which in their interrelationships comprise the proposition in question apply to God, in flagrant violation of the proposition’s content. So one needs a characterisation of ineffability, which is not logically inconsistent but captures as much as possible of the stringency of our first characterisation.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God*, 22-23.

<sup>111</sup> Keith E. Yandel. *Christianity and Philosophy*, 109.

Hick refines his argument by means of a distinction between two different classifications of properties. He speaks of “*substantial properties*” which refer to God as “good” “powerful” or “all knowing” and “*purely formal and logically generated properties*” which identify such properties as must apply to anything. In this sense it may be easier to think of logically generated properties as *predicates*. When speaking in this way Hick presumably has in mind those properties which anything must have in order to exist at all.

However, is it not the case that logically generated properties or predicates are telling us something that is true of God? Hick’s response is to assert that formal properties do not actually disclose anything positive about the nature of God. He states:

Modern philosophical discussions of ineffability have introduced a distinction between, on the one hand, what we can call substantial attributes meaning attributes which tell us something positive about the divine nature, and, on the other hand, purely formal linguistically generated attributes which do not tell us anything about the divine nature. Thus that God is ineffable formally entails that God has the attribute of ineffability. And even to refer to God at all entails that God has the attribute of being able to be referred to. But such purely formal attributes give rise only to trivial truths, trivial in the sense that they do not in any way contradict or undermine the divine ineffability.<sup>112</sup>

The problem with properties generated by logic alone is not that we cannot think of such predicates, but rather that Hick seems to smuggle in substantial properties under the guise

---

<sup>112</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 6.

of logically generated ones. Speaking of the divine *noumenon* as the postulated ground of religious experience, he writes:

All that we can say of the divine noumenon is that it is the source and ground of all those experienced realities, as also of human minds which are aware of these different phenomenal forms<sup>113</sup>

However, it seems quite impossible to make such a statement and not to concede that we are saying something positive about God, not the least of which is the causal impact of God upon human consciousness. On other occasions Hick speaks along similar lines leaving the reader with the very distinct impression that the divine noumenon is being disclosed well beyond the limitations of properties generated only by logic.

For example, he writes:

The broad hypothesis which I am suggesting then is that the Infinite Spirit presses in all the time upon the multiplicity of finite human spirits.<sup>114</sup>

The attribute of “infinity” is generally taken to mean that God is a being not limited by anything outside of himself. In one sense Hick may argue that this is not actually ascribing a substantial property to God but rather is highlighting the absence of something, i.e. limitation. However, it would appear that when infinity is applied to time and space the positive attributes of eternity and omnipresence are the inevitable outcome.

---

<sup>113</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 21.

<sup>114</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 25.

This dilemma is summed up well by Alvin Plantinga, who writes:

Hick distinguishes positive attributions of the Real from statements of negative theology primarily on the basis of whether they appear to be saying that the Real has a certain property. But looks can be deceiving. Take the sentence 'James is not married', apparently saying that James lacks a certain property. But the sentence 'James is a bachelor' which has the same content, apparently attributes a substantial property to James. If a substantial property attribution can masquerade as a claim of negative theology, and a piece of negative theology can be dressed up to look like a substantial property attribution, we require from Hick a more clearly stated criterion for how to distinguish cases.<sup>115</sup>

The difficulty however is more acute than this lack of clarity in respect of criteria. Hick's negation of all positive properties is itself beset with greater problems. Returning to his earlier statement:

God...cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of these descriptive terms apply literally to the un-experienceable reality that underlies that realm.<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Religious Diversity," in Graham Oppy and Michael Scott, eds., *Reading Philosophy of Religion*, 280-309.

<sup>116</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 350.

This list comprises a series of seven contradictory predicates, none of which can be ascribed to, or predicated of, Hick's ineffable God:

1. Neither one nor many.
2. Neither person nor thing.
3. Neither conscious nor unconscious.
4. Neither purposive nor not purposive.
5. Neither substance nor process.
6. Neither good nor evil.
7. Neither loving nor hating.

However, it is surely impossible to envisage what the ontological status of such an entity could be. The description is quite incoherent. As Douglas Groothuis has said:

Hick appears to be defining the Real out of existence altogether.<sup>117</sup>

In other words it is not possible to set up two predicates that stand in contradictory relationship to one another and assert that both cannot be true. One or other of the predicates must be true because there is no other possibility. Thus when Hick states that God is neither conscious nor unconscious he has exhausted all logical possibilities. He suggests that God is neither one nor many yet addresses God in the singular. At other times he speaks of the love of God yet describes him as neither good nor evil. Curiously enough within Hick's soteriology the fruit of God's influence upon people's lives is seen in the moral

---

<sup>117</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 582.

qualities that stretch across the various faith communities. But how can this can be so if the divine reality does not possess moral qualities nor is directed by a sense of purpose? The absence of moral qualities or properties rules out the propriety of one course of action over another within the sphere of religiously-inspired ethics.

Thus Keith Yandell writes:

If God indeed were ineffable (or ineffable save for existence entailed properties), then we would be justified in supposing that no standard of behaviour was any more religiously or theistically appropriate than any other : it would presumably be as appropriate to sacrifice children as to construct facilities for their care, or to curse God as to praise him.<sup>118</sup>

Given Hick's commitment to the ineffability doctrine, it is difficult to see how he could construct a viable doctrine of Revelation consistent with it. The notion of mystical experience as cognition, and faith as interpretation, seems at odds with the accompanying claim that the *noumenon* can have no causal relationship to the phenomenon, and that there is never knowledge of the *nuomenon*, only of the phenomena. The object of knowledge is appearance, never reality.

As Christopher Sinkinson points out:

Normally, when considering Kant, critics describe the problem in terms of the inability of the human mind to penetrate beyond that given in appearances to know

---

<sup>118</sup> Keith E. Yandel, *Christianity and Philosophy*, 125.

the thing-in-itself, but significantly for theology the problem is symmetrical. It is impossible for the thing- in-itself to reveal itself as phenomenon or as the thing-for-others. The barrier is insurmountable from either side because this epistemology supposes that all knowledge is conditioned by the mind... The price of Hick's use of this Kantian insight is the impossibility of the Ultimate Real being able to disclose itself in any way whether through inner experience or verbal prophecy. Revelation is impossible not only because direct knowledge of divine reality is impossible; it is also impossible because the Ultimate Real cannot in any way that we know or describe influence or affect, the world of appearances.<sup>119</sup>

John Hick has stated that God cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating.

As we have seen this assertion has been criticized on the grounds that it is not possible to set up two predicates that stand in contradictory relationship to one another, and assert that both cannot be true. In other words, one or other of the predicates must be true, because he has exhausted all logical possibilities. Put another way, in asserting his claim Hick is violating laws of logic.

---

<sup>119</sup> Christopher Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths: A Critical Study of John Hick's Religious Pluralism*, 148.

### 3.5 Laws of Logic

This refutation of Hick's assertion is based on the belief that no such world or state of affairs can be thought to exist, in which the laws of logic do not obtain. In other words, there appears to be a certainty about laws of logic very much in the same way that there is certainty about mathematics, and this certainty is of such a nature that it is impossible to imagine a world where such laws do not obtain. In other words, is there only one logic? If one accepts the premise of an argument, then there is a corresponding compulsion to accept the conclusion that follows inexorably from it. John Frame explores this notion of obligation or compulsion in the following statement:

The necessity (to accept the conclusion) is not physical. No one is pulling strings on our vocal chords, physically compelling us to assert the conclusion of a valid argument. The compulsion can be resisted and often is; many people refuse to assent to sound argument despite the "must", the necessity, of logical inference. Nor is the necessity pragmatic, in any obvious way. That is to say, we do not accept logical conclusions merely because doing that makes life more pleasant for us or serves our self interest in some obvious way. Often accepting a logical conclusion makes life harder; thus many flee from the reality represented by the conclusion of a sound argument.<sup>120</sup>

The point being made by Frame is that there is something of an analytic necessity behind the compulsion to accept the validity of the conclusion of an argument. Indeed, it may be

---

<sup>120</sup> John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 248.



stated that if someone believes a premise, then what that premise entails by way of implication is something the human mind does accept, and cannot but accept.

Now it may well be that such knowledge is suppressed by the person as a moral agent, but at some level of consciousness the truth of the argument is assented to. We may doubt, for example, an historian's analysis of the reasons behind the Vietnam War, but we are not going to doubt either that  $3+3 = 6$ , or the valid conclusion to the syllogism that if all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then he too is mortal.

Again as Frame suggests:

A syllogism seems to carry with it a certainty that transcends all sense experience that takes precedence over all non-logical and nonmathematical claims.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, in all possible worlds, for example, it is commonly held that reality will correspond to the following 3 laws:

i) Law of Identity

Any entity is what it is and not something else. Thus a horse is a horse and not a dog. (*If p then p*)

ii) Law of non-contradiction

An entity cannot have logically incompatible properties, or be A and not A at the same time in the same way. Thus, a horse cannot be not a horse. (*not both P and not P*)

iii) Law of the excluded middle

---

<sup>121</sup>John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 249.

An entity is either some particular thing or it is not. A horse is either a horse or not a horse.

(*Either p or not p*)

Gordon Clark unpacks the implication of any denial of, for example, the law of non-contradiction. He writes:

If contradictory statements are true of the same subject at the same time evidently all things will be the same thing. Socrates will be a ship, a house, as well as a man. But if precisely the same attributes attach to Crito that attach to Socrates it follows that Socrates is Crito. Not only so but the ship in the harbour since it has the same list of attributes too will be identified with this Socrates-Crito person. In fact everything will be the same thing. All differences among things will vanish and all will be one.<sup>122</sup>

Indeed, Clark commenting upon the status of the law of non-contradiction:

The principle, be it noted again, is stated not merely as a law of thought but primarily as a law of being. The ontological form is basic, the purely logical is derivative: it becomes a law of thought because it is first a law of being.<sup>123</sup>

However, these conditions notwithstanding, contemporary theology for the most part evidences little positivity towards the place of logic in theological discourse but is replete with warnings against an over reliance upon it.

---

<sup>122</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 103.

<sup>123</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 98.

John Frame writes:

Today, however, it is hard to imagine Calvinists being accused of over confidence in logic. Except in the writings of Gordon H. Clark, John H. Gerster, and some of their disciples it is difficult now in fact to find any positive words about logic in Reformed theology and easy to find warnings against its misuse. Berkouwer frequently warns us against developing doctrine by drawing deductive inferences. Van Til, while not denying the legitimacy of logical inference, is more concerned with the dangers of over reliance on logic than he is with the dangers of neglecting it. The followers of Dooyeweerd, too, are more concerned with the danger of absolutizing the logical aspect than they are over the danger of being illogical.<sup>124</sup>

Now it has to be said that this aversion to logic is not something unique to the pursuit of theological or religious studies.

Dallas Willard commenting upon contemporary trends in American academia writes:

An understanding of ordinary logic is no longer a required part of university degree courses, as was almost universally the case sixty years ago.<sup>125</sup>

Such aversion, however, has not always prevailed. Within post-Reformation circles in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, theology was increasingly shaped by a form of protestant scholasticism. Such scholasticism dates from around 1550-1830 and is associated with the era of “confessional

---

<sup>124</sup> John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 242.

<sup>125</sup> Dallas Willard, *Personal Religion – Public Reality?*, 7.

orthodoxy' which was prevalent in Protestant and Catholic universities of Western Europe. The application of the term "scholastic" to such post-Calvin and post-Luther theologians was of course pejorative, as it was when deprecatingly applied to the earlier scholastics of the Middle- Ages.

Early scholasticism is best viewed as a medieval movement, prevalent in the period 1250-1500, which aimed at the systematising of Christian theology with the aim of demonstrating, and thus defending, the rational character of its truth-claims. The first task the scholastic thinkers set themselves was that of establishing a method of enquiry around which theological thought could be organised. The search for a methodology eventually settled on the philosophy of Aristotle, whose writings were being rediscovered in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Thus Christian theological dogma was organized around logic and philosophical concepts, with detailed thought given to establishing with linguistic precision the meaning(s) of words. Alastair McGrath summarises the direction of theology under the Scholastics' influence:

The noted medieval historian Etienne Gilson has aptly described the great scholastic systems as 'cathedrals of the mind'. Each scholastic system tried to embrace reality in its totality, dealing with matters of logic, metaphysics and theology. Everything was shown to have its logical place in a totally comprehensive intellectual system.<sup>126</sup>

McGrath also takes the view that whilst there was a tendency towards overly sophisticated debate the Scholastics made significant contributions to theological discourse. He writes:

---

<sup>126</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 51-52.

However, scholasticism may be argued to have made major contributions in a number of key areas of Christian theology, especially in relation to the role of reason and logic in theology. The writings of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham –often singled out as the three most influential of all scholastic writers – make massive contributions to this area of theology, which served as landmarks ever since.<sup>127</sup>

Gordon Clark, whose own writings seem in every sense Scholastic, identifies one of the benefits of “systems of theology” such as those formulated by Aquinas. He writes:

The intellectual labours of the preceding two centuries, often brilliant, were largely spent on special problems. Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* is an instance, and for that matter so was *Proslogion*. But even though Augustinianism furnished a unity of approach no one, not even Bonaventura who came closest to doing so, succeeded in placing multitudinous details in their mutual logical relationships. Without an integrated system it is easy to “solve” two special problems from two incompatible principles without noticing the inconsistency; with an integrated system it is easy to demolish less skilful constructions. This is what Thomas did.<sup>128</sup>

By 1350, however, Scholasticism was in decline as theological subtleties became increasingly central to scholastic discussions. Separating into rival schools on the basis of minor issues gradually removed theological concerns away from the daily life of ordinary believers. Those

---

<sup>127</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 37.

<sup>128</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 269.

unsympathetic to the scholastic enterprise viewed these endeavours as nothing more than the study of trivial pursuits or theological and logical nit-picking.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation the Reformers initially, for the most part, rejected the scholastic emphasis with its accompanying natural theology and Aristotelian methodology, and sought to develop new theological paradigms. Both Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-1564) laboured to provide a fairly straightforward though systematic presentation of Christian dogma but did so with little recourse to the Scholastic methodology. Indeed the Reformation assumed an initial antipathy towards Scholasticism.

This, however, did not last long as Herman Bavinck writes:

Initially the Reformation assumed a hostile posture toward scholasticism and philosophy. But it soon changed its mind. Because it was not, nor wanted to be a sect, it could not do so without theology. Even Luther and Melanchthon therefore already resumed the use of philosophy and recognised its usefulness. Calvin assumed the high position from the start, saw in philosophy an “outstanding gift of God”, and was followed in this assessment by all Reformed theologians.<sup>129</sup>

The circumstances that served as a catalyst for a new surge in scholastic methodology was the political and ecclesiastical landscape of Europe during the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The presence of Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed Churches inevitably required each

---

<sup>129</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 608.

ecclesiastical body to articulate and defend whatever truths they were confessing. This was done by constructing systematic representations of each faith while also attempting to demonstrate the internal consistency and coherence of the ideas within a sophisticated faith system. In order to facilitate this task Aristotelian philosophy was once again employed in the attempt to place theological claims on a more solid and rational foundation.

Alister McGrath identifies 4 characteristics that distinguished the new approach to theology:

1. Human reason was assigned a major role in the exploration and defence of Christian theology.
2. Christian theology was presented as a logically coherent and rational defensible system, derived from syllogistic deductions based upon axioms. In other words, theology began from first principles and proceeded to deduce its doctrines on their basis.
3. Theology was understood to be grounded upon Aristotelian philosophy and particularly Aristotelian insights into the nature of method; later Reformed writers are better described as philosophical, rather than biblical, theologians.
4. Theology became orientated towards metaphysical and speculative questions, especially relating to the nature of God, God's will for humanity and creation, and above all the doctrine of predestination.<sup>130</sup>

In the last analysis a new range of systematic theologies appeared, and this was wedded to a rigorous, renewed concern for method, and the establishment of first principles. Indeed,

---

<sup>130</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 77.

a case can be made that scholasticism was nothing other than an academic method of arranging theological truths in an organised and coherent way.

Furthermore, the notion that God is not subject to laws of logic, or that human logic is restricted to this side of the ontological boundary that separates God and the created order, is held by theologians not normally sympathetic to John Hick. Thomas Torrance appears to hold to this position. He writes:

God who is infinitely greater than our words or logic has stooped down to speak with us in our poor creaturely words and human logic and thus give them a Truth beyond any power or capacity they can have in themselves.<sup>131</sup>

And again:

Real theological thinking is thus alive and on the move and under the control of Truth that makes it free from imprisonment in timeless logical connections.<sup>132</sup>

Torrance is not alone in this conviction. Many theologians subscribe to the view that having given the laws of logic God himself is not subject to these laws. Indeed, the notion of the law of non-contradiction, for example, as possessing no necessity in the sphere of transcendent ontology has become commonplace. On these grounds God need not be defined in terms of one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or

---

<sup>131</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, 205.

<sup>132</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, 154.



non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. God need not conform to whatever logical possibilities or limitations exist this side of the ontological boundary. All of this finds an echo in the writings of Rene' Descartes and other philosophers who believed that God's subjection to laws of logic compromised the doctrine of His omnipotence.

Ronald Nash summarises this for us:

Descartes believed an omnipotent being could do absolutely anything including that which is self-contradictory. God's actions are not limited by laws of logic. Descartes advanced this view on the conviction apparently, that the Thomist position dishonours God by making him subject to a law (the law of non-contradiction) that Descartes believed is as dependent on God as any other law. Just as God could have created the world so that it was governed by different laws of nature so also He could have subjected the world to different logical and mathematical laws. According to Descartes God freely decreed the logical and mathematical truths that obtain in our world and could have created a different world in which the principle of non-contradiction or propositions like "two plus two equals four" were necessarily false.<sup>133</sup>

The notion of God's omnipotence being compromised by the limitations placed upon him by logic is not an argument that commends itself. Richard Swinburne for example alerts us to the fact that the idea of a logically impossible state of affairs should not be understood to be

---

<sup>133</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God*, 39.

anything at all beyond the form of words employed to describe it. He argues that those who suggest that a truly omnipotent being ought to be able to do the logically impossible err. He writes:

A logically impossible action is thought to be an action of one kind, on a par with an action of another kind, the physically impossible. But it is not. A logically impossible action is not an action. It is what is described by a form of words which purport to describe an action but do not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose can be done. It is no objection to A's omnipotence that he cannot make a square circle. This is because "making a square circle" does not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose can be done.<sup>134</sup>

Neither does it seem that retreating into the notion of "mystery" allows us to postulate a being to whom none of our concepts apply. If none of our concepts apply to God, then we can know nothing of him and for that reason are quite unable to justify or provide any warrant for the claim that he transcends logic or anything else. The notion of "encounter" is also rendered vacuous as a means of experiencing a God who transcends our conceptual schemes.

---

<sup>134</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 149.

Gordon Clark in addressing the issue states:

This point needs some emphasis and repetition. A meeting in which no conceptual knowledge or intellectual content was conveyed would not give the subject any reason for *thinking* he had met *God*. Nor could such an inarticulate experience point to anything definite beyond itself. Though the experience might still be stubbornly called religion by those who think or better feel that emotion is the essence of religion it could never be identified as Christianity Judaism or Islam.<sup>135</sup>

Carl F.H. Henry summarises well the dilemma of those such as Hick and Torrance who wish to set forth truths about a God who transcends our conceptual schemes. He writes:

Torrance seems to be privy to objective propositional knowledge about God which his methodology pointedly disallows to other human beings. From what source, for example, did Torrance derive the information that “there is an ultimate objectivity which cannot be enclosed within the creaturely objectivities through which we encounter it, an objectivity that indefinitely transcends creaturely objectivities.”<sup>136</sup>

In the last analysis the case for a God who transcends our conceptual schemes, but of whom something can be said, has still to be made. However the straightforward though profound

---

<sup>135</sup> Gordon Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible and its Critics*, 102.

<sup>136</sup> Carl. F. H. Henry, *Vol.3 of Revelation and Authority*, 223.

question that Hick and others are struggling with is quite simply; how can the mind of man know the mind of God?

### *3.6 The Logos Doctrine*

In contradistinction to all theories that place God forever beyond the intellectual comprehension of man, the classical Logos doctrine appears to establish the grounds that make rational communication between the divine and human minds possible.

Ronald Nash supports this contention in the following way:

As we have seen, the allegation that a radical disparity exists between the transcendent divine mind and the finite mind of human beings is a fundamental postulate of the theological agnosticism that pervades much contemporary theology. An adequate alternative to this special position requires the development of an ontology and epistemology that will bridge the alleged gap. Fortunately, no new theory is required. The answers to this problem can be found in the Logos doctrine of the early church. Jesus Christ the eternal Logos of God mediates all divine revelation and grounds the correspondence between divine and human minds. The eternal Logos is a necessary condition for the communication of revealed truth; indeed, it is a necessary condition for human knowledge about anything. From the

beginning of Christianity it was believed that reason and logic have cosmic significance.<sup>137</sup>

In other words, according to Nash, the Logos of God functions so as to bridge the alleged ontological and epistemological gap between the mind of God and the mind of man.

The gospel according to John chapter 1 verse 1 is a significant text which introduces us to the idea of the Logos: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Perhaps the most tedious way to approach any investigation of the word Logos is to list the various dictionary meanings. However, in attempting to do so we are confronted immediately by the fact that the word *Λόγος* can be translated by around 40 different English words, while some lexicons have more than 5 columns, each 90 lines long. The many meanings listed include: reason, reckoning, computation, ratio, speech, oracle, explanation, wisdom, sentence, argument, principle and law. In the light of the fact that we are faced with making some sort of choice between long lists of possible meanings, a more fruitful route of enquiry would be that of seeking to establish the actual usage of the word and the meaning of the idea as it is found in Greek philosophical and Hebrew literature. However, on the other hand the word Logos as applied to Christ is very rare in the New Testament and

---

<sup>137</sup> Ronald. H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 59.

it is hazardous to read into it the various meanings it had in Philo and the Greek philosophers.

It may be worth noting that the present trend within contemporary scholarship seems to be to interpret the concept of the Logos by viewing it within an Old Testament Hebrew setting, rather than a Greek one. The primary reason for this is that the phrases, “The Word of God” and, “The Word of The Lord”, are employed throughout the Old Testament in such a way as to confer upon the phrases something of an independent existence and personification.

James D.G. Dunn comments in this regard that most scholars:

... would agree that the principal background against which the Logos prologue must be set is the Old Testament itself, and the thought of inter-testamental Hellenistic Judaism, particularly expressed in the Wisdom literature.<sup>138</sup>

George Eldon Ladd unpacks the idea in the following way:

In the Old Testament, the word is not merely an utterance; it is a semi-hypostatized existence so that it can go forth and accomplish the divine purpose. (Isa.55v10-11). The word of God uttered at creation, expressed through the mouth of the prophets (cf. Jer. 1 v4, 11 ; 2v1) and in the law (Ps 119 v 38, 41, 105), has a number of functions that may well be attributed to the Logos in John. The concept of personified wisdom also provides Jewish background for the Logos concept. In Proverbs 8 v 22-31, wisdom is semi-hypostatized. Wisdom was the first of all created

---

<sup>138</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 215.

things and at the creation of the world “I was beside him like a master workman  
 “(Proverbs 8 v 30). Wisdom comes forth from God to dwell in Israel to make them  
 God’s people.<sup>139</sup>

Within Greek thought the idea of Logos can be reliably traced back to the philosopher and Greek scholar Heraclitus who lived during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and in whose thought the word was something of a technical term. As a philosopher Heraclitus taught that all things were in a state of flux or change and that the basic structure or nature of the universe consisted of 3 principal elements, these being, fire, earth and water, of which fire was the primary element. However, in the midst of this flux there is one constant fixed pattern which in turn functions as the explanatory principle of the universe, and this Heraclitus called ‘the Logos’. However the word is translated, it represents a fixed truth that remains the same or a supreme intelligence that rules the universe thus making the universe an ordered whole. In practical terms the logos provided the link between rational discourse and the world’s rational structure.

The Stoic philosophers whose school was organised about 300 B.C. took the thought of Heraclitus and further developed it. For the Stoics the Logos was the active, unifying rational principle of the universe and the source of all that existed. The whole universe was conceived as forming a single living whole that was permeated by a power understood to be fire which in turn reveals itself as a powerful energy that lies behind and gives form to the

---

<sup>139</sup> Gordon Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 240.

unformed universe. This energy manifests itself through innumerable *seminal logoi* or formative forces that energise all of nature and life. These *seminal logoi* either control or actually are each living thing, including man who lives in accordance with the same principle. Viewed within the world of religious thought it would not be inaccurate to describe the world view of Heraclitus and the Stoics as pantheistic.

The Logos doctrine gained new impetus under the influence and thought of Philo of Alexandria who lived from about 25 B.C. until about A.D. 50. Alexandria had been founded by Alexander the Great and for nearly three centuries a Jewish Diaspora had flourished in the city due to the fact that Alexander had established the city upon principles of religious liberty. A Jew by birth and upbringing, Philo is principally remembered for his philosophical treatment of the Scriptures. Philo, influenced both by Hellenic thought and the Old Testament, made use of the Logos term as a highly significant component in his theological scheme that fused together aspects of Greek and Judaic thought into Hellenistic Judaism. The overall aim of Philo seems to have been to demonstrate that the philosophical and religious enquiries of the Greek philosophers are actually to be realised in and through the God of Abraham. Within this scheme the Logos was employed as the concept which functioned as a vehicle or means of mediation between the transcendent God and the creation.

Philo's attempt to synthesise Greek philosophy and the world of Hebrew thought was aided considerably by several associated ideas that he took for granted:

Gordon Clark explains:



The possibility of Philo's combining Hebrew revelation with pagan philosophy depends on a complex of factors, which, if they seem strange today were taken as normal and good sense then. First, the Bible presumably does not contain all truth, and therefore it is possible that Plato and Aristotle may have discovered some. Second so admirable is Plato's general viewpoint and so often in accord with Scripture that one should not rule out the possibility that somehow or another he had received information from Moses. Then, third, Philo believed that the Scriptures should be interpreted allegorically, with the result that, an indefinite latitude was permitted within which many philosophic themes might be found.<sup>140</sup>

Philo's allegorical interpretations placed upon the Hebrew Scriptures seem today to be somewhat fanciful but of greater interest is his theory of ideas and the terminology he employs in connection with this. It is in connection with the theory of ideas that Philo speaks of the Logos whom he calls the Son of God. Like Plato, Philo distinguished between the material world and the ideal world of eternal forms but unlike Plato he represented the world of ideas as ideas in the mind of God.

This world of ideas he called the Logos, and as Gordon Clark suggests the:

Logos passes from a stage internal in the mind of God to a stage external as a really existing world of ideas, and even to a third stage in which he becomes immanent in the sensible world.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 196.

<sup>141</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 202.

Ronald Nash expands:

The forms are created in the sensible world in the sense that God is a necessary condition for their existence. If God did not exist the forms would not exist. Since the forms subsist in the mind of God they are ontologically dependent on God for their existence. But since God is eternal and the Forms are His eternal ideas the Forms are also eternal. They are the eternal thoughts of God which serve as an archetypal pattern for the corporeal world.<sup>142</sup>

There is little doubt that the title of the Logos as Son of God gave his theory of the Logos some standing before early Christian thinkers, who also accepted the method of allegorical interpretation employed by Philo.

However it is widely recognised that Philo's use of Son of God cannot be pressed into the service of Christian theology simply by means of this terminological analogy.

Once again Gordon Clark explains:

Such a Christian Interpretation of Philo cannot be successfully maintained. It depends too greatly on Philo's highly figurative language. Obviously Philo personifies the Logos but this personification is entirely metaphorical. Philo says that Laughter is a son of God. God is the husband of wisdom, Wisdom is the daughter of God,

---

<sup>142</sup> Ronald. H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 60.

Wisdom is the mother of the Logos, and, even Wisdom is the father of instruction.

Such metaphors cancel each other out. Philo's sober position is that for epistemological and cosmological reasons there must exist a world of ideas, but contrary to Plato God must be supreme.<sup>143</sup>

The use of the word Logos in Philo has of course given rise to the question of a possible relationship between Alexandrian Judaism, and the writer of the fourth gospel. However it is clear that while Philo wrote about the Logos in personal terms this was not conceived in terms of an historical person. Philo's personification of the Logos was nothing more than a metaphysical abstraction, whereas John's gospel speaks of the Logos as an historical and unique individual. Indeed James Dunn takes the view that John was the first to identify the word of God as a particular person and the first Christian writer to conceive clearly of the personal pre-existence of the Logos-Son and to present it as a fundamental part of his message.<sup>144</sup>

In Philo the office of the Logos does not go beyond the divine facts of the creation and preservation of the world and is not placed in any relationship to the Messiah and the

---

<sup>143</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 202.

<sup>144</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Christology of the New Testament*, 215.

Messianic Kingdom. Moreover, unlike Philo who viewed matter as evil John's Logos came in a bodily form.

Gordon Clark, commenting on the Logos in bodily form, writes:

This culminating idea, the great idea which differentiates the Christian Logos doctrine from every other philosophy as well as from the semi-Jewish Philonic doctrine is the incarnation of the Word, the Reason, or the Wisdom of God. The Logos became flesh. So utterly contradictory and even repulsive to all Greek speculation is this that one is astounded to read reputed scholars who characterise John as Hellenistic and dependent upon Gnostic, Stoic and Platonic sources.<sup>145</sup>

In other words despite verbal similarities and thematic links with either Greek or Old Testament thought John breaks new ground completely when, he sets forth unique features of the personified logos. John Chapter 1 v 18 provides us with the prologue:

John's prologue unpacks five distinct characteristics of Jesus as the logos of God and it is the theological significance of such that John intends us to focus our thoughts upon.

The first meaning attached to the theology of Jesus as the logos of God is the pre-existence of Jesus. John Chapter 1: 1 declares that Jesus was in the beginning. Such language directs our thoughts to eternity prior to creation and the existence of the logos as the agent of

---

<sup>145</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Johannine Logos*, 32.

creation. John chapter 1: 1-2 follows with a second claim that Jesus is divine. The logos, was with God but also was God. This seems to express the twin notion that Jesus was deity but not fully exhaustive of deity. John's meaning may be said to imply that everything the logos is, God is, but also that the logos has an exclusive identity and that God is more than the Word.

It should be noted that the pre-existence of Christ is a theme developed within the writings of Paul. First Corinthians 8:6 and Colossians 1:15-20 would seem very clearly to envisage some sort of pre-existence attributed to Jesus. According to James D.G. Dunn<sup>146</sup> the view that commands unanimity of agreement among New Testament scholars is the one that understands these passages to be drawing upon earlier Jewish reflection upon divine Wisdom, which is now embodied in Christ.

John chapter 1:3 sets forth the logos not as the ultimate source of creation but rather the agency or mediator through whom God as the ultimate source created the All that exists. It ought to be clear at this point that John is not sourcing his ideas from Greek thought, for the simple reason that the notion of a fiat creation was present only in Hebrew thought, and this as Genesis describes.

John chapter 1:14 exclaims that the logos partook of human nature and dwelt among us. This statement, very much like the previous claim to fiat creation, provides a solid refutation of the notion that John borrowed from Greek thought. The Greek dualism that separated God from the world would be quite at variance with the incarnation of deity as John

---

<sup>146</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 269.

declares. The truth that John is at pains to impress upon the reader is that it was God himself in the logos who entered into space-time and history, taking upon himself all that was essential to our human nature. Throughout the gospel records Jesus is described as experiencing a comprehensive range of human experiences such as love, compassion, weariness, thirst, sorrow, zeal and anger. He exhibits human need such as food, drink and sleep.

The fifth claim John makes is that the Logos functions as one who enlightens and reveals such issues as the truth, grace, glory and God himself.

Bringing all these statements together we may say with Herman Bavinck:

Jesus is the Logos and in an utterly unique sense: revealer and revelation at the same time. All the revelations and words of God in nature and history, in creation and re-creation, both in the Old and New Testament, have their ground unity and centre in him. He is the sun; the individual words of God are his rays. The word of God in nature, in Israel, in the NT, in Scripture may never even for a moment be separated and abstracted from him. God's revelation exists only because he is the logos. He is the first principle of cognition in a general sense of all knowledge, in a special sense, as the logos incarnate, of all knowledge of God, of religion and of theology.<sup>147</sup>

In keeping with the thought of Bavinck, the New Testament ascribes three functions to the Christian Logos. As such we discover that Christ is spoken of in terms of a *cosmological*, an

---

<sup>147</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 402

*epistemological* and a *soteriological* function. All this is to say that Jesus as logos is the necessary condition for the existence of the world, for all human knowledge and for salvation and redemption.

What makes intelligent communication from God to those created in his image possible, according to the logos teaching, is that man – as one who is created in God’s image – also has the same rational structure inherent in his person. In other words, there is a correspondence between man and God at the level of rational thought and linguistic expression.

It ought to be clear, therefore, that according to a logos Christology human knowledge is possible by virtue of our relationship to the eternal logos of God, Jesus Christ. This is so because mankind is created in the image of God, and this image makes possible rational communication and revelation between God and man. It stands to reason that if such rational communication is to be meaningful, then God must structure his acts of communication in accordance with the same laws of logic that human thought conforms to, and to which language gives expression.

## *Chapter 4: God's Self-Disclosure*

In rejecting the Logos doctrine as historically formulated by Christian theologians, on the grounds that a radical disparity exists between the transcendent divine mind and the finite mind, John Hick nonetheless understood that the felt presence and awareness of the divine-transcendent provided sufficient grounds for establishing a genuine communication between the divine and the human. Indeed, for John Hick the felt presence and awareness of the divine transcendent was an essential family trait in the world family of religious devotees. It is this awareness of God that is sufficient to invite an uncompelled response of worship.

In this respect Hick's notion of God's self-disclosure, or revelation, as mediated in this way would, at least on the surface, appear to be not too dissimilar to the traditional view of what Christian theologians have labelled 'General Revelation'.

### *4.1 Biblical General Revelation*

The notion of a God consciousness, mediated through nature, and corresponding to an innate religious awareness, has indeed enjoyed a place within the history of Christian thought. Herman Bavinck writes:



This general revelation has at all times been unanimously accepted and defended in Christian theology. It was particularly upheld and highly valued by Reformed theologians.<sup>148</sup>

General or Natural Revelation is best understood as God's self-disclosure and self-communication in the cosmos and the created world.

James Packer explains the idea:

The Bible records the words that God has spoken in history about his work of redemption in history. But one of the things which the Bible reveals is that God also reveals Himself apart from the Bible and in a way not dependent upon the revelation of his saving purpose. The latter revelation was given through a particular sequence of events, to particular men at particular times in particular places; but this other form of revelation is given everywhere and at all times, to all men, through the ordinary experience of being alive in God's world. It is given through all created things... because this revelation is conveyed through the ordinary course of the created order it is called 'natural' in contrast with the 'supernatural' revelation given through God's particular redemptive utterances in history. Because it is universally given it is called 'general' in contrast with 'special' revelation recorded in the Bible

---

<sup>148</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 311

which comes only to those who read or hear God's word and which never reaches many men.<sup>149</sup>

General Revelation also is considered to be a manifestation of God's Common Grace. As Donald Macleod states:

The primary instrument of common grace is God's general revelation.<sup>150</sup>

There is, therefore, an objective revelation provided in and through the created order, which is correlative to a God-consciousness within our human psychology, which in turn is explained in terms of man being created in the image of God. Calvin writes:

That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.<sup>151</sup>

Calvin understands this sense of divinity or seed of religion as an implanted, intuitive and indelible awareness of the existence of God which is present in every person. This is part

---

<sup>149</sup> J. I. Packer, *18 Words: The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know*, 24-25

<sup>150</sup> Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God*, 149.

<sup>151</sup> John Calvin, vol. 1 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), trans. by Henry Beveridge, 43-44.

and parcel of the psychological makeup of mankind, as created in the image of God. It is important to recognise that for Calvin this is not a revelation that is restricted to any one particular class or group of people, but rather is available to all people, whether they be Christian, Muslim or Buddhist. There is then a general revelation of God that is universally available to all people and is experienced by all people, yet this revelation is distinct in mode, content and function from what is termed special revelation.

Calvin identifies three consequences of this inbuilt consciousness of the existence of God: (a) the universality of religious impulse; (b) a sense of guilt in the conscience; and (c) a servile fear of God.

Objectively, before mankind stands the created order, which is characterised by perspicuity and is revelatory in character. All people by observing the universe around them function as, and experience themselves to be, interpreters of this general revelation. In the very act of observing the created order, the necessary idea of the existence of God is triggered.

However, while it is true that the idea of general revelation is fundamental to Christianity, there has existed some debate about the mode of this general revelation. Is this general revelation through which we experience a knowledge or awareness of God immediate, or mediate?

William P. Alston lists three distinct sorts of experience that fit with the notion of apprehending God:

- A. Absolute immediacy. One is aware of X but not through anything else, for example, a state of consciousness.

B. Mediated immediacy (direct perception). One is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived.

C. Mediated perception. One is aware of X through the awareness of another object of perception.<sup>152</sup>

In favour of a mediated and *a posteriori* perception R.C. Sproul writes:

Mediated natural knowledge involves human reflection on the creation. The invisible things of God are known by means of the visible things. In Romans 1:20, Paul is affirming that humans can in fact move from the phenomenal realm to the noumenal realm making the dispute with Kant all the more vivid. The method of knowing here is not the immediate apprehension of the inner being of God. The knowledge is mediate or inferential, indicating the rational power to deduce the necessary existence of the invisible from the perception of the visible.<sup>153</sup>

Thus the argument speaks in favour of, a knowledge of God through inferential reasoning.

Other theologians understand this apprehension of God as resultant upon a form of a-priori immediate apprehension. Greg Bahnsen writes:

---

<sup>152</sup> William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21-22.

<sup>153</sup> R.C. Sproul, John Gerstener, Arthur Lindsey, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defence of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*, 44.

Even without a discursive argument or a chain of inferences from elementary observations about experience all men see and recognise the signature of the creator in the world that he created and controls.<sup>154</sup>

What Bahnsen and others have in mind is the presence of an immediate apprehension that is analogous to the way a person recognises a relative or close friend when he or she comes within view.

In one sense the tension between the two can be resolved if we accept that the speed of one's inferential reasoning in this case may be so rapid and spontaneous that it is experienced as if no process of thought is involved at all. However, what is common to both is that there is a sense of deity in the human heart that is correlative to the revelation of God in and through the created order, and this revelation is of such a nature that one can reliably infer or intuitively recognise the existence of God.

#### *4.2 Pluralistic General Revelation*

John Hick understands the presence of a revelation from God which is mediated through the natural order, and with which the human mind engages by means of what he calls 'interpretation'. This interpretation in turn takes two forms, namely *explanation* and *recognition*. In the first instance we may speak of interpretation as explanation, as when we

---

<sup>154</sup> Greg. L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, 184.

are engaged, for example, in literary analysis of a novel by Dickens or Conrad or some other writer. Interpretation as *recognition* involves an immediate act of apprehending something that is presented to us and takes the form of a primary and intuitive response to the created order.

It is interpretation as *recognition* that Hick takes to be fundamental to the appropriation of knowledge. Religious faith is therefore understood as interpretation resultant upon an awareness of God mediated through nature.

Hick's representation appears to bear similarities to the Christian notion of general revelation, insofar as it is universally available to all mankind and involves a human awareness of, and freely chosen felt response to, divinity by means of interpretation. He states:

The broad hypothesis which I am suggesting, then, is that the Infinite Spirit presses in all the time upon the multiplicity of finite human spirits and yet always so that our finite awareness of this encompassing reality is filtered through a set of human religious concepts and spiritual practices.<sup>155</sup>

Despite these apparent similarities there are a number of ways in which Hick's proposal is radically different from the Christian notion of general revelation.

---

<sup>155</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 25.

Consider Hick's view of the universe. According to the pluralistic hypothesis the universe is ambiguous and for this reason allows for a multiplicity of equally valid interpretations. He writes:

By religious ambiguity of the universe I do not mean that it has no definite character but that it is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways.<sup>156</sup>

And again:

It seems then that the universe maintains its inscrutable ambiguity. In some respects, it invites whilst in others it repels a religious response. It permits both a religious and naturalistic faith but is(?)haunted in each case by a contrary possibility that can never be exorcised. Any realistic defence of the rationality of religious conviction must therefore start from this situation of systematic ambiguity.<sup>157</sup>

While holding to the ambiguous nature of the universe Hick nonetheless defends the rationality of religious belief allied to a religious interpretation of the universe. That is to say that the believer is within his/her epistemic rights to take a religious view of the universe and is fully warranted in doing so.

He states:

---

<sup>156</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 73.

<sup>157</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 124.

Those who participate in the realm of religious experience are, as rational people, fully entitled to trust it.<sup>158</sup>

Thus Hick's epistemological scheme holds together the nature of the universe as ambiguous yet the status of faith as a fully warranted and valid interpretation. For this reason, the religious person is within his/her epistemic rights to view the universe in this way.

However, in contrast to Hick, Christian theologians such as Calvin understand general revelation to be *unambiguous and pre-interpreted*. Secondly, although the believer is indeed fully warranted in holding to a belief in God, Calvin and others speak of the *obligation* to believe and not simply the rationality of belief. Conversely to disbelieve in the face of general revelation is to engage in not only an irrational but ultimately an unethical act. For this reason, the person who interprets the universe in a non-religious way is not within her/his epistemic rights in doing so. John Frame represents this view when writing:

Is it ever rational, either in the "situated sense" or in the "objective" sense, to disbelieve in God's existence or irrational to believe in it? Obviously not, in the objective sense, granted that God exists. In the situated sense the question becomes: is anyone ever in a situation where he lacks a ground for believing that God exists? I would say no on the basis of Romans 1, which teaches that all persons not only have grounds for believing in God (epistemic permission if you will) but that all actually know him at some level of consciousness.<sup>159</sup>

---

<sup>158</sup> John Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason*, 54.

<sup>159</sup> John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 398.



Commenting upon Romans Chapter 1 18:21 Greg Bahnsen writes:

In the first place we observe that Paul says that men do actually in some sense see the truth. We do not do justice to this passage by merely saying that all men or most men believe in God or believe that God probably exists. Paul says that the revelation of the only existing God is so clearly imprinted upon man himself and upon his environment that no matter how hard he tries he cannot suppress this fact. As psychologically active self-conscious creatures they must see something of the truth. They hold down the truth to be sure but it is the truth they hold down. Nor is it that this truth is objectively placed before them only in nature and in the make-up of man. It is to be sure on this that Paul does lay this emphasis. But knowledge is also *in man* in the sense that his subjective reaction to that which he sees shows some acquaintance with the truth. The invisible things are perceived (*kathoratai*). Knowing God (*gnontes ton theon*) they have not glorified God.<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, 187.

## *Chapter 5: God's Universal Influence*

### *5.1 God's Spirit at Work in All Religions?*

Given the presence of (a) Logos Christology, (b) General Revelation, and (c) the activity of God's Spirit in the world, the question must now be asked as to the relationship of this to the world of religious experience beyond the Christian Faith. Clearly it is not just the Christian who falls within the scope of God's universal care.

John Hick's response to this question is to locate the evidence of God's Spirit at work in all religions through (a) the presence at times of comparable levels of morality in world religion when contrasted with that evidenced by the followers of Christ, (b) the presence at times of demonstrably lower levels of morality in the followers of Christ, when contrasted with the lives of other religious devotees (3) the presence of a common religious experience with which the life of faith begins, evidenced in the fundamental common soteriological feature of turning away from self to God and our fellow man.

### *5.2 Comparable Levels of Morality*

In respect of Hick's *first point* i.e. the presence at times of comparable levels of morality in world religions when contrasted with that evidenced by the followers of Christ, it must be stressed that the Christian position is not one that denies the presence of moral qualities and virtues within the lives of non-Christians, nor that the Spirit of God is active only within the Christian Community. According to Christian theology there is such a divine activity, understood as Common Grace, which is efficacious, revelatory, and benevolent but not

soteriological. Almost all standard Reformed systematic theologies include a section unpacking the notion of common grace. This is a term theologians use to describe the benevolence of God, to all mankind universally. John Frame sums up the challenge posed by Hick's response when he concedes:

But for our present purposes, the main point to notice is that some of the blessings of common grace look very much like the blessings of salvation itself.<sup>161</sup>

The doctrine has been formulated both negatively and positively in response to the very issues that seem to vex John Hick.

Common grace can be defined as:

God's universal non-saving grace, in which blessings are given to humanity for physical sustenance, pleasure, learning, beauty etc, as expressions of God's goodness. It is particularly contrasted in Reformed theology with God's special or saving grace.<sup>162</sup>

Donald Macleod provides a helpful summation of the matter in following statement:

Alongside the doctrine of redemptive grace, Reformed theology also developed the doctrine of common grace. This was intended to account especially for three factors in the human situation. *First*, the blessings enjoyed by the reprobate. The sun shines on them, the rain falls, their harvests are plentiful and their prosperity often exceeds

---

<sup>161</sup> John H. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 436.

<sup>162</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 120.

that of the righteous. *Secondly*, the laudable qualities to be found in the lives of those who are totally alienated from God. They are often exemplary citizens, courageous patriots, wise and affectionate parents. Their lives are usually decent, and sometimes heroic. *Thirdly*, the cultural achievements of the natural man. He has toiled with conspicuous success in the fields of art, literature, music, philosophy, politics, medicine, engineering and indeed in every area of human endeavour.<sup>163</sup>

John Calvin, attributing such qualities or virtues in the life on the non-Christian to the Holy Spirit, states:

We ought not to forget that those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which he distributes to whomever he wills, for the common good of mankind. The understanding and knowledge of Bezalel and Oholiab needed to construct the Tabernacle, had to be instilled in them by the Spirit of God (Ex.31:2-11; 35:30-35). It is no wonder, then, that the knowledge of all that is most excellent in the human life is said to be instilled in them by the Spirit of God.<sup>164</sup>

Sinclair Ferguson highlights the tendency at times to confuse God's common grace with his special grace:

In this connection a common hermeneutical principle is often employed, which involves identification and universalizability: what is stated to be true of a particular

---

<sup>163</sup>Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God*, 145.

<sup>164</sup>John Calvin, vol.1 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) trans. by Henry Beveridge, 235-236.

individual in Scripture is assumed to be true of the whole of humanity *mutatis mutandis*... this assumes too much. It is appropriate to believe, with Calvin and many others that all truth is God's truth, even when it is found in the mouth of the ungodly, and that all good gifts come to us from above (Jas.1:17). Yet it is quite another thing to assume that this is an evidence of the Spirit's saving or transforming presence.<sup>165</sup>

### 5.3 Demonstrably Low levels of Morality

In relation to Hick's *second point* i.e. the presence at times of demonstrably lower levels of morality in the followers of Christ, when contrasted with the lives of other religious devotees, a formal rebuttal frequently offered by Christian apologists is one that attempts to draw a distinction between the truth-claims of Christianity and the moral qualities of those making the claims. In short, just as the truth of a proposition does not depend on the ethics of the one asserting it, so it is argued that the truth-claims of Christianity are not confirmed or disconfirmed by the values or moral standards upheld, and modelled, by the religious devotees who confess and proclaim these truths. In short, a logical fallacy lies at the heart of Hick's rebuttal which confuses the confessional aspect of the Christian community with the relational and ethical standards of the community. But while the logical form of this argument may be sound, the theology is much weaker. Hick is, in fact,

---

<sup>165</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology*, 246.

on solid ground when he insists that the Bible does not allow for such a bifurcation within Christian spirituality.

Richard B. Hays comments:

The fruit of God's love is the creation of communities that confess, worship, and pray together in a way that glorifies God. Those who are baptized, Paul insists, have become "one in Christ Jesus", no longer divided by former distinctions of ethnicity, social status, or gender (Gal.3:28). Because in Christ they are all "sons of God" they all belong together in a single family in which all are joint heirs. His passionate opposition to Cephas in Antioch (Gal. 2 11-22) sprang from his urgent conviction that Jews and Gentiles must be one in Christ, not separated by social barriers.<sup>166</sup>

Again, Richard B. Hays writes:

Thus "community" is not merely a concept; as the term is used here, it points to the concrete social manifestation of the people of God."<sup>167</sup>

The attempted rebuttal of Hick's criticism simply misses the point altogether. The truth proclaimed by the Christian Church is set forth within the Bible as the truth embodied and modelled in the life of the Christian Church. Logically there may be a distinction between the two but theologically no such bifurcation is envisaged within the Bible. Indeed, as Donald Macleod points out the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is itself set forth as a

---

<sup>166</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 32.

<sup>167</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 196

model for the nature of the Christian Community both at the confessional and relational level,<sup>168</sup>

Is it possible, then, to concede to the legitimacy of Hick's observation that the professing Church has been found wanting at times, without concurring wholeheartedly with his conclusion, i.e. that this phenomenon renders null and void the claim of the Church to stand in an exclusive soteriological relationship to the Holy Spirit?

Perhaps the first criticism of Hick is that he advances the notion of *self-ascription*. That is to say he is willing to regard as Christian any group, movement, or body that claims to be so. However, the Bible itself does not advance self-ascription as an authenticating test of faith but rather asserts the requirement of a credible profession of faith evidenced in an appropriate orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Secondly, he promotes the somewhat discredited concept of *Christian Nations* as a valid category. The notion that modern European States of the twentieth century can be equated in some sense with, for example, the Byzantine Empire, or that King Leopold II of Belgium served as a representative of the Christian faith as he governed the Congo, requires a great deal more analysis and scrutiny than Hick is prepared to offer. Precisely to what extent were the European nations Christian? Was the Second World War, really a theatre of conflict between representatives of the Christian Faith in any meaningful sense? These sorts of questions require careful and painstaking analysis both at an historical and theological level of enquiry. Sweeping generalizations that equate Europe with the Church

---

<sup>168</sup> Donald Macleod, *Shared Life: The Trinity & The Fellowship of God's People*.

are unlikely to yield much in the way of meaningful answers to the sort of questions Hick is addressing.

Thirdly, Hick seems not to allow for the possibility of *corruption within ecclesiastical bodies*. Certainly during the Middle-Ages there existed a fusion of ideology, politics and Church, and this at a time when the presence of the Church was ubiquitous throughout Europe and its influence powerful and persuasive. The Reformation movements themselves were in large measure a reaction against the corruption of the institutional Church. Given such a complex set of circumstances, it would be incumbent upon any scholar of religious history to engage in painstaking analysis, and this at many levels, before pronouncing that this or that grouping could be considered authentic spokespeople for the Christian Church. According to Jesus, the salt can lose its saltiness, and indeed frequently did so, from Genesis to the Churches in Revelation.

Alister McGrath commenting upon this very point states:

There is however another point which must be made. I make it with a degree of sadness and reluctance. At least some of what passes as Christianity is a pathetic distortion of the real thing. Nominal Christianity – a form of Christianity which retains its outward beliefs, while its life force has been spent – is among the worst enemies of the Christian apologist. The spiritual and moral deadness which often lingers around such forms of Christianity can be deeply oppressing, and can cause the most negative associations to arise in the minds of individuals.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>169</sup> Alister McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Communicating Christianity Effectively*, 106.



However, the fundamental answer to this dilemma posed by Hick lies in the fact that he has embraced a somewhat idealistic notion of Christian spirituality. The dynamics of Christian spirituality do not assert that every Christian will be at every stage of his/ her life demonstrably more virtuous than the best of their neighbours.

The Christian claim is a modest but profound one, and is articulated well by Alister McGrath. He writes:

Christian believers and the Christian Church continue to sin, and fall short of what God intends for them. The real test is whether Christianity makes a difference – whether the ‘after’ is superior to the ‘before’. <sup>170</sup>

John Hick seems to envisage that the Christian upon profession of faith has conferred upon him or her, as if by magic, a Christ-like character replete with the complete range of moral virtues consistent with the fruit of the Spirit of God. However, the claim made by the Christian is not that sin or frailty has been eradicated by the grace of God, but rather that a process of change has begun in conformity to the blueprint of God for righteous living. Thus a person whose character, prior to becoming a Christian, has been shaped by life-long addictions, anti-social behaviour, destructive habits, crippling low self-esteem or sexual abuse, may not seem any better at all in comparison to his neighbour whose worldview is Buddhist, and who has been raised in a more wholesome social and family context. John Hick may well perceive that the Buddhist devotee is displaying greater levels of self-control while exercising higher levels of social virtue in his interaction within the community. His

---

<sup>170</sup> Alister McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Communicating Christianity Effectively*, 106.

parenting skills may be more advanced, his sensitivity to the law may be heightened, and his organization and stewardship of his finances may display levels of thrift quite absent in the life of the Christian. The change envisaged by the teaching of Jesus, though, is not one that gives birth to a superhero, who emerges from the act of regeneration as a replica of Christ, but rather one that gives birth to a person who remains frail and sinful, yet in whose life the *after* is superior to the *before*. This process of change for the most part will be recognised by those who know that person best, and such a change must be measured against the unique backdrop of the individual's previous life and worldview. Thus a person keeping his appointments faithfully while paying his or her rent consistently, after years of proving themselves untrustworthy and unreliable, is a testimony to God's transformative grace. However, to those who do not know this person, he or she may seem less of a model citizen than the devout Muslim who has been an upstanding member of the community all his days.

#### *5.4 The Presence of a Common Religious Experience*

As to Hick's *third point*, namely, the presence of a common religious experience with which the life of faith begins and which is evidenced in the fundamental common soteriological feature of turning away from self to God and to our fellow man, it may well appear that this was adumbrated in the Old Testament, where God is spoken of as influencing and directing the actions of individuals who are otherwise not known for their allegiance to the God of Israel.

Isaiah 45:1, for example, speaks of Cyrus being caught up in God's redemptive purposes:

"This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut".

It is also set forth in the New Testament. In John Chapter 1:9 we read of the logos as the true light, which gives light to everyone, coming into the world.

Given that the Logos has epistemological, soteriological and cosmological functions we must ask if it is permissible to speak of the soteriological function as one exclusively expressed in terms of Christian religious experience or can we speak of the Christian religious experience as simply fuller in kind but not greater in respect of salvation than other religious experiences? This question was one that John Hick wrestled with as others had done before him.

Justin Martyr, for example, writes as follows:

It is unreasonable to argue, in refutation of our doctrines, that we assert Christ to have been born a hundred and fifty years ago, under Cyrenius, and to have given his teaching somewhat later, under Pontius Pilate; and to accuse us of implying that all men born before that time were not accountable. To refute this, I will dispose of the difficulty by anticipation. We are taught that Christ is the First-born of God, and we have explained above that he is the Word (reason) of whom all mankind have a share, and those who lived according to reason are Christians, even though they were classed as atheists. For example among Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus;

among non-Greeks, Abraham, Ananias, Azarias and Misael and Elias and many others.<sup>171</sup>

In citing Justin Martyr in this way it is possible to view him not as a pluralist but as a proponent of *accessibilism*. Terrance L. Tiessen defines *accessibilism* in the following way:

Accessibilism asserts that Jesus Christ is exclusively the way of salvation and that the covenantal relationships God established with Israel and the Church in working out his saving program are unique and unparalleled. Accessibilists believe, however, that there is biblical reason to be *hopeful* (not simply agnostic) about the possibility of salvation for those who do not hear the gospel. So they do not restrict God's saving work to the boundaries of the Church as ecclesiocenterists do.<sup>172</sup>

Tiessen's assertion is that this is not a new idea but one that can be located in the thought of major theologians of every era of Church history and theological tradition. Thus he cites Zwingli and Luther as well as the Puritan Richard Baxter alongside many others. This of course is not the same thing as Hick's pluralism but is a concession that the Logos of God is at work in a soteriological way within the life of those outside of the Church and out with the sound of the gospel.

John Hick clearly understands the divine logos to be functioning in a broad and unitary way.

He writes:

---

<sup>171</sup> Henry Bettenson, *The Early Church Fathers: A selection from the writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson, 60.

<sup>172</sup> Terrence L. Tiessen, *Who can be Saved?* 33.

If the divine Logos is indeed at work and has always been at work in this way throughout the life of mankind we may expect great developments in the various religious traditions in this new age in which we are increasingly interacting with one another.<sup>173</sup>

And again:

If we define salvation as actual human change, a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness (with all the human evils that flow from this) to a radically new orientation centred in God and manifested in the “fruit of the Spirit” then it seems clear that salvation is taking place within all of the world religions-and taking place so far as we can tell to more or less the same extent.<sup>174</sup>

Herman Bavinck addresses the relationship of the Logos and General Revelation to the world at large in Volume One of his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

He writes:

It was not long before Christian theology, instructed by Holy Scripture, made an important distinction in the matter of revelation. On the one hand the connections and agreement between the religion of the Christians and the religion of the pagans, between theology and philosophy, could not be completely denied. On the other hand Christianity certainly was a unique and independent religion essentially

---

<sup>173</sup> John Hick, *The Second Christianity*, 88-89.

<sup>174</sup> John Hick, “A Pluralistic View”, in Stanley N. Grundy, Denis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 43.

different from the pagans. In the face of this tension early Christian theologians were led to make a distinction between “natural” revelation (religion, theology) and “supernatural” revelation.<sup>175</sup>

Bavinck interprets the non-supernatural revelation, nonetheless, as an illumination by the Logos, and writes in the following manner:

Among pagans, says Scripture, there is a revelation of God, an illumination by the Logos, a working of God’s Spirit (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Ps.33:6; 104: 30; Job 32:8; Eccles.3:19; Prov. 8: 22; Mal.1:11-14; John1:9; Rom.2:14; Gal.4:1-3; Acts 14:16, 17; 17:22-30). Many church fathers (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and others), assumed an operation of the Logos in the pagan world. Although Augustine repeatedly spoke very unfavourably about pagans, he nevertheless recognised that they saw adumbrations of the truth, that the truth was not wholly concealed from them, and, accordingly that we must take advantage of the truth elements in pagan philosophy and appropriate it. Still, since God’s image has not been so completely erased from the soul of man by the stain of earthly affections, as to have left remaining there the merest lineaments of it , whence it might be justly said that man, even in the ungodliness of his life, does or appreciates some things contained in the law. Also many impure peoples recognise much that is true.<sup>176</sup>

---

<sup>175</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 302-3.

<sup>176</sup>Herman Bavinck *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*: ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 318-319.

Addressing the issue of common grace Bavinck recognised that while the operation of common grace was understood by the Reformers to be present and influential in relation to various aspects of human culture, this did not extend to the teaching and practices of non-Christian religions. At this level common grace was restricted to the notion of innate and acquired religion as expressed in the formula of Calvin. Thus these religions were traced to deception and demonic influences.

Bavinck takes a different view of things in this regard, seeing Christianity as the fulfilment of all that is best in world religion. He writes:

However, an operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace is discernible not only in science and art, morality and law but also in religions. Calvin rightly spoke of "a seed of religion," a "sense of divinity". Founders of religion, after all, were not impostors or agents of Satan but men who, being religiously inclined, had to fulfil a mission to their time and people and often exerted a beneficial influence on the life of peoples. The various religions, however mixed with error they may have been, to some extent met people's religious needs, and brought consolation amidst the pain and sorrow of life.<sup>177</sup>

Donald Macleod expands on this in the following way:

The belief that Jesus Christ is universal Lord and the only Saviour does not imply that Christianity has a monopoly of truth. It shares many of its values (for example, love

---

<sup>177</sup>Herman Bavinck *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*: ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 319-320.

of one's neighbour, concern for the poor and belief in the sanctity of life) with other world faiths. It also shares with some of those faiths a significant body of theological belief.<sup>178</sup>

As established previously John Hick stretches this overlap in religious awareness to one of religious experience with which the life lived in response to God begins.

---

<sup>178</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology*, 239.



## *Chapter 6: The Distinctive Character of Christian Regeneration*

### *6.1 Regeneration Defined*

The inception of spiritual life, according to which one is made alive to God by the Spirit, has come to be known within Christian theology as the doctrine and experience of ‘regeneration’. Despite the importance of regeneration to Christian spirituality, it is doubtful whether the early church had any theological comprehension of the complexities involved in the concept of regeneration.

In the first period of church history, through the preaching of the gospel, spiritual rebirth was a reality that people experienced. However, at this stage there seemed little need to engage in any further or deeper analysis concerning the precise workings of God’s Spirit in bringing about the experience of new birth.

As Herman Bavinck observes:

Rebirth was an event that they had lived through in their own souls, but the moment they began to think and write about it, the explanation was inadequate. As a rule, people confined themselves in their theoretical reflections to the demands of the gospel, faith and repentance but did not push through to the inner hidden workings of the Spirit that lay behind them.<sup>179</sup>

Louis Berkhof takes a similar view when he states:

---

<sup>179</sup>Herman Bavinck *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*: ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend, 319-320.

In the mind of the early Church the term “regeneration” did not stand for a sharply defined concept. It was used to denote a change closely connected with the washing away of sins, and no clear distinction was made between regeneration and justification.<sup>180</sup>

Indeed, in the history of theology the unpacking and exposition of the various elements contained within soteriology, e.g. regeneration, justification and sanctification, had to wait until other more pressing questions, such as those related to the person and work of Christ, had been clarified.

As Sinclair Ferguson comments:

Only in the discussions of the Middle-Ages and the Reformation Period were more definitive statements on soteriology sought and provided.<sup>181</sup>

A working definition of regeneration is given by Wayne Grudem who writes:

We may define regeneration as follows: Regeneration is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us.<sup>182</sup>

Michael Barrett writes similarly:

---

<sup>180</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 465-466.

<sup>181</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology*, 94.

<sup>182</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 699.

The component of the gospel that concerns the inception of spiritual life is *regeneration*. Regeneration refers to the implantation of the principle of spiritual life in the heart of the sinner resulting in an instantaneous, radical and obvious change of nature affecting the whole governing disposition of life.<sup>183</sup>

Regeneration is thus the ontological and existential condition necessary for all further spiritual transformation in the Christian life. Irrespective of what other differences exist within the broad Christian Church this doctrine is a core component of Christian spirituality.<sup>184</sup>

In the context of our study, the theology of regeneration occupies a place of great importance, and that for the following reason: John Hick has attempted to identify a common and universal religious experience by peeling away what he understands to be the doctrinal element within religion from its experiential core, before describing the latter in phenomenological terms. It is, according to Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, this phenomenological description that provides us with the universal and common denominator of all religious experience.

The question that must be asked, therefore, is: to what extent, if any, can biblical regeneration – when described in phenomenological terms – be harmonised with Hick's description of this universal religious experience?

---

<sup>183</sup> Michael P. V. Barrett, *Complete In Him*, 76.

<sup>184</sup> Stanley N. Grundy, (Ed.) *Four Views On Christian Spirituality*.

## 6.2 Regeneration and Religious Experience

Hick outlines his understanding of the operation of the Spirit in the following way:

The broad hypothesis which I am suggesting, then, is that the Infinite Spirit presses in all the time upon the multiplicity of finite human spirits and yet always so that our finite awareness of this encompassing reality is filtered through a set of human religious concepts and spiritual practices.<sup>185</sup>

According to Hick, this activity of the Infinite Spirit causes a person to be conscious of something (God) outside of oneself, and such awareness takes as its object the Transcendent or The Real, although there is no direct contact with the Real at any time. Thus when viewed phenomenologically, religious experience for Hick begins with (a) an awareness of the Real as that which is ultimate, and (b) a life-changing response evoked by that experience.

Within Hick's hypothesis our finite response to the Infinite Spirit is filtered through a set of human religious concepts and spiritual practices. Such theological formulations, therefore, are not part of the transcendent experience, but already exist as social, cultural and religious constructs, which in turn are brought to bear as interpretive frameworks upon one's transcendent experience.

It must be said that such bifurcation of Christian spirituality in the way that Hick suggests finds little support within the history of ecumenical and mainstream Christian theology.

---

<sup>185</sup> John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*, 25.

Even within those Christian traditions grounded in a cataphatic and contemplative spirituality, there is recognition that we cannot separate truth experienced from truth confessed.

Vladimir Lossky commenting upon this writes:

The term 'mystical theology' denotes no more than a spirituality which expresses a doctrinal attitude... The Eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology, between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogmas affirmed by the church... Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other... Mysticism is the perfecting and crown of all theology: as theology *par excellence*.<sup>186</sup>

Moreover at the level of a theistic worldview it is not immediately obvious how much of this biblical, religious and interpretive structure could have come into being in the first place.

For example, what factors could possibly have given rise to the idea of the Trinity, or salvation through a God-man's death on the cross, or again the concept of linear time embraced within the tiny nation of Israel, throughout a period of ancient history when other religious cultures viewed time as cyclical?<sup>187</sup>

The main objection, however, to Hick's thesis in the context of pneumatology is that the Christian experience of regeneration described in phenomenological terms cannot be

---

<sup>186</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 8-9

<sup>187</sup> Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender*, 127

harmonised with the experience of the Spirit as set forth by Hick within his pluralistic scheme. The primary reason for this is that what Hick insists are detachable constructs, and therefore not part of the essence of the experience, are in fact, for the Christian, very much part of the experience itself. In other words, any phenomenological description of Christian experience must contain within it aspects of the experience such as, for example, an awareness of God's holiness, a conviction of sin and moral wrongdoing, and the self-understanding that follows. These features are not, as Hick suggests, extraneous to and detachable from the Christian experience, but are fully part of it.

Paul Helm states:

The elements of Christian conversion are not simply a collection of feelings or experiences, or religious sensations, but they are elements set within a framework of understanding and belief about God, the person himself and the world around him. This fact about the character of Christian experience is one of the reasons why it is impossible to think of the various major religions of the world – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and so forth – as agreeing in a common core of religious experience and differing only in the different interpretations which each has built around this common foundation. For it is not that the religious experience of the Buddhist, is the same as that of the Christian, as two identical suits might be wrapped in different coloured wrapping paper.<sup>188</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup> Paul Helm, *The Beginnings – Word & Spirit in Conversion*, 13-14.

In an identical way Muhammad's testimony, for example, to receiving the words of the Koran in the cave of *Hira* forms part of his religious experience, and is not some sort of doctrinal component that can be removed from the experience, when such is described phenomenologically. Certainly the various components of Muhammad's revelation can be analysed separately, but they cannot be separated existentially within his experience. Now, as Keith Yandell points out<sup>189</sup> precisely the same problem is encountered when analysing the phenomenological shape and content of enlightenment experiences of other faiths. Thus an enlightenment experience in Advaita Vedanta is described as being identical to a quality-less Brahman. In Jainism one enters into an existential independence or ontological security alongside being omniscient and in Theravada Buddhism we are composed at any given time of momentary elements and over time of bundles of such elements. Now the question is not whether these phenomenological features can actually be true of any given experience but simply that this is how these religious devotees describe the experience of which they are aware. Thus the notion that one can experientially separate the subconscious elements of an enlightenment experience from the conscious manifestations of that experience (represented in the vocabulary describing it) is not consistent with how the phenomenology of religion is experienced, conceptualised and described by those to whom such an experience has come.

Hick may well concede that phenomenologically these experiences of the enlightened life and the Christian experience of spiritual rebirth are different yet insist at the same time

---

<sup>189</sup> Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 272

these are but two forms of regeneration with very important features in common. For example, each hinges upon a radical shift from self-centredness to a new orientation centred in the Ultimate which evidences itself in a common moral and spiritual outlook. The Buddhist is filled with compassion and the Christian with love. These in practice seem quite indistinguishable. However, the problem is that the fruit of the awakened character as described here is not necessarily religious in any shape or form, but may well be manifest in the life of the non-religious person. As such this cannot be taken then as evidence of a religious experience. Moreover, the experience of the various religious devotees is more complicated than Hick's reductionist instincts would suggest. All religions in the world give rise to alternative and contradictory metaphysical systems. Indeed there are only a limited number of mutually exclusive ways to view the world and it is these worldviews that emerge from within the religious faith of the worshipper. Thus, Theism and the Panentheism seem quite incompatible with Pantheism and Polytheism. How can such systems of thought emerge from within a common core religious or spiritual experience?

### *6.3 Regeneration and the Spirit of God*

A similar objection can be raised against the insistence by Hick that the work of the Spirit must conform to his own representation of it. The Christian's experience of the Spirit of God is on the same footing as his or her experience of regeneration, i.e. something capable of being described, represented and indeed tested for authenticity. The link between the influence of the Spirit and the experience of regeneration is understood within Christian spirituality to be two sides of the one coin.



Within the New Testament the chief expositor of regeneration through the Spirit is the Apostle John and the *locus classicus* on the topic is John Chapter 3 v 3-8, in which the teaching of Jesus on the matter is recorded:

Commenting upon this Sinclair Ferguson observes:

While the term 'regeneration' is not strictly associated with the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, the idea of inauguration into the Kingdom of God as Spirit-wrought new birth is widespread and in fact is foundational in Johannine theology... Being 'born of God' (i.e. through the Spirit) becomes a characteristic description of being a Christian in Johannine theology.<sup>190</sup>

Louis Berkhof further emphasises the monergistic nature of regeneration when he writes:

The only adequate view is that of the Church of all ages, that the Holy Spirit is the efficient cause of regeneration. This means that the Holy Spirit works directly on the heart of man and changes its spiritual condition. There is no co-operation of the sinner in this work whatsoever. It is the work of the Holy Spirit directly and exclusively, Ezek.11:19; John 1:13; Acts 16; Rom.9:16; Phil.2:13. Regeneration, then, is to be conceived monergistically. God alone works, and the sinner has no part in it whatsoever.<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology*, 118.

<sup>191</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 466.

As we move to the writings of the Apostle Paul it becomes clear that the experience of the Spirit is not something divorced from his understanding of the Spirit.

James Dunn comments:

Paul did not turn away from the thought of the Spirit as the experienced Spirit. It was too fundamental to his own and his churches' spirituality. The existential reality of 'receiving the spirit' was too central to his understanding of the crucial transition to Christian discipleship. But he was farsighted (or experienced) enough to hedge the experiential dimension around with critical tests and to insist on Christ and the remembered character of Christ as the fundamental norm by which all claims to experience the Spirit should be measured.<sup>192</sup>

In fact, far from setting forth the Spirit of God in vague generalised terms, Paul's theology evidenced a clarity concerning: (a) the identify, and (b) the ministry of the Spirit of God that had been absent prior to the New Testament era.

James D. G. Dunn picks up on this point, informing us that Paul provides a redefinition, or tighter definition, of the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ:

This in fact constitutes one of Paul's most important contributions to biblical theology, or to any theology which looks to the Scriptures of Jew and Christian for its framework. For in speaking of the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ, Paul was reflecting theologically on what had been hitherto an ill-defined and vague conceptuality of

---

<sup>192</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 434.

the Spirit – ill-defined and vague precisely because it embraced or lay behind a wide range of experience and existential phenomena. Paul’s definition, therefore, gave the conception of the Spirit the sharpness and clarity it had been lacking. The point is worth some emphasis. Paul did not speak of the Spirit uncritically in relation to all experiences of himself or his converts. On the contrary “the Spirit of Christ” became in effect a critical conceptual tool which enabled him to evaluate experiences and to distinguish one experience from another. Only those experiences were to be recognised and welcomed which manifested the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ.<sup>193</sup>

Throughout the New Testament the experience of spirit-wrought regeneration is understood to be authenticated by the changes that are effected in the life of the regenerated person. In other words, contrary to the *modus operandi* of the Spirit set forth in Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, the Christian community’s experience of the Spirit’s soteriological workings in regeneration is conceptualised in such a way as to make any separation of the rebirth experience from the life that follows it quite impossible.

John Murray articulates the position well when he writes:

The causal priority of regeneration to any saving activity on our part does not mean that the regenerate person may still live in sin and be unconverted. The passages in 1 John make this perfectly clear for not only does John emphasise in these passages the logical and causal priority of regeneration, but also, and perhaps more overtly, the invariable concomitance of regeneration on the one hand, and, on the other, the

---

<sup>193</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 433.

doing of righteousness (2:29), and the loving of our fellow men and knowing God (4:7), the not sinning and the inability to sin (3:19; 5:19), believing that Jesus is the Christ (5:1), willing subjection to the commandments of God and overcoming the world (5:4). It is quite impossible to think of regeneration as existing in abstraction from this catalogue of virtues, and this is the equivalent of saying that these virtues must coexist with and accompany regeneration. That is to say that regeneration cannot be conceived of apart from the new life which it begets.<sup>194</sup>

Murray further states:

We do find, however, in Paul that the new birth in the priority of its conception as a creative act of God, is indissolubly related to the broader notion of renewal, including at least the earlier and probably later stages of conscious regeneration on the part of the renewed person.<sup>195</sup>

It ought to be pointed out, however, that the fuller understanding of the person and work of the Spirit as revealed in the New Testament was in large measure adumbrated and indeed fully anticipated in the Old Testament. Indeed, within the Old Testament we are introduced to the projected blessings of the promised Messianic salvation, framed precisely in terms of regeneration.

John Murray writes:

---

<sup>194</sup> John Murray, *Volume 2 of Collected Writings, Systematic Theology*, 198.

<sup>195</sup> John Murray, *Volume 2 of Collected Writings, Systematic Theology*, 188.

As Dr Warfield says, 'The re-creative activity of the Spirit of God is made the crowning Messianic blessing (Isa. 32:15, 34:16, 44:3, 59:21; Ezek. 11:19, 18:31, 36:27, 27:14, Zech. 12:10); and this is as much to say that the promised Messianic salvation included in it provision for the renewal of men's hearts as well as for the expiation of their guilt'. There can be no doubt that the Old Testament in prophecy testifies to regeneration as one crowning blessing, if not *the* crowning blessing, of salvation on its subjective side as it was to be realised in the Messianic age.<sup>196</sup>

Within the writings of Paul the central functional role of the Spirit of God is that of uniting us to Christ through regeneration, and it is this theological paradigm of being 'in Christ' which dominates Paul's exposition of the Christian life. Theologically the significance of the term 'in Christ' lies, for Paul, in the parallel phrase, 'in Adam'. The latter communicates the idea that whatever Adam did he did so representatively, therefore one's standing before God is determined by Adam's actions. Conversely, whatever Christ did he did so representatively, and therefore all the saving benefits of his work accrue to those who are united to him. Sinclair Ferguson comments:

The dominant motif and architectonic principle of the order of salvation should therefore be union with Christ in the Spirit.<sup>197</sup>

This expression of 'union with Christ' and its variants are used by Paul around 160 times. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:2 and Romans 16:7 the words are used as virtual synonyms for 'Christian'.

---

<sup>196</sup> John Murray, Volume 2 of Collected Writings, *Systematic Theology*, 173-174.

<sup>197</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology*, 100.

It is only by our being in 'union with Christ', and this 'through the Spirit', that we receive the multiple blessings associated with salvation. Moreover, these salvific benefits accrue to the believer exclusively, immediately and simultaneously. There is also an eschatological dimension to the work of the Spirit, because all aspects of salvation have yet to be consummated, although all are in principle already the possession of the believer.

James D. G. Dunn suggests that the motif can be analysed under three broad categories. These are not rigidly distinct, but in differing contexts blend into one another. He writes:

First there is the more *objective* usage, referring particularly to the redemptive act which happened 'in Christ' or depends on what Christ is yet to do. Second there is a more *subjective* usage where Paul speaks regularly of believers *being* 'in Christ' or 'in the Lord'. Third, both 'in Christ' and 'in the Lord' phrases occur where Paul has in view his own activity or is exhorting his readers to adopt a particular attitude or course of action.<sup>198</sup>

In the light of the above, it ought to be clear that the experience of regeneration effected by the Spirit and with which the Christian life begins, is an irreducibly complex one that cannot be equated with, or subsumed into, the more generic religious experience set forth by Hick. The specific Christological structure inherent within the Christian experience of God may be analysed systematically, but not separated existentially, in the experience of the believer. In short, the Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu religious experience is quite distinct from the

---

<sup>198</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 397-398.

Christian religious experience, and indeed within those faith communities is understood to be so.

#### *6.4 Regeneration and the Principle of Credulity*

In the light of this phenomenological description and theological interpretation of Christian regeneration, all in the context of the Spirit's work, John Hick finds himself caught in the horns of an epistemological dilemma. Within his discussions on warranted belief Hick established with some skill that religious experience should be trusted as a source of knowledge, by citing the *principle of credulity*, which states that a person's claim to perceive or experience something is *prima facie* justified, unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary. The principle of credulity is thus the assertion based on observation that our experience is normally reliable, and that if we experience X then this experience provides evidence that X exists. He writes:

It is a basic principle of life that we trust and act upon our experience except where we have reason to distrust it.<sup>199</sup>

Having cited the 'principle of credulity' as foundational to the believer's claim that his or her belief in God is rational and warranted, he is now compelled, in the interests of his pluralistic hypothesis, to deny to the believer the same principle in respect of the structure and content of the experience that has given rise to the belief in the first instance.

---

<sup>199</sup> John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 173.

According to Christian testimony this particular experience with which the Christian life begins, admits of a very specific structure and content. The structure of the experience is described as 'subject/consciousness/object' and the content is set forth under the aforementioned theology of regeneration. There may, of course, be additional experiences of which biblical spirituality admits (Isaiah in the temple, Moses in the wilderness, Saul on the Damascus Road), but whatever their differences these are all understood to conform to the same structure of 'subject/consciousness/object'.

Keith E. Yandell unpacks the idea:

The relevant experiences are subject/consciousness/object in structure; they involve a person having an experience which, providing that the experience is reliable, involves being aware of something or someone that is not dependent for its existence on being experienced. In that respect such experiences resemble experiences of shrubs and worms (these being typically reliable, and shrubs and worms existing independently of one's experiencing them)... They are also experiences in which the at least apparent object is not oneself, one's body or one's mental states; they are (if reliable) experiences of something other than oneself or one's body or one's states – a being that exists distinct from and independent of oneself.<sup>200</sup>

Hick is happy to accept the reality of such experiences; the reality of a transcendent dimension to the experiences; but not the varying phenomenological descriptions of these

---

<sup>200</sup> Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 216-217.



experiences. Given, however, that these are existentially inseparable from one another and both supported by his principle of credulity this seems rather strange.

In the light of the above one has to have certain uneasiness about Hick's own claim to a special immunity from the very epistemological relativism that he insists everyone else is subject to. In short Hick demands that his own theology of world religion be taken as objectively true but that all others be denied that possibility.

Daniel Clendenin writes in this regard:

The absolutist character and confidence of pluralism can hold true only if it assumes a neutral, Archimedean position above and beyond all space and time, but this is precisely what pluralism claims is impossible. Methodologically the pluralist vantage point is no more neutral, detached or objective, nor any less universal-absolutistic than exclusivism. Only the content is different. And notice the content! The entire pluralist project belies its ostensibly modest epistemology. One would be hard pushed to proffer a more deliberate attempt at a trans-historico-cultural- absolute meta-theory, a more grandiose and sweeping interpretation of all religious doctrine and experience of all peoples times and cultures. <sup>201</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, *Many Gods – Many Lords*. 101

### *6.5 The Relationship of the Spirit to the World System*

A final point germane to the subject is the fact that within the New Testament itself the Spirit of God is represented as one who stands unequivocally in an antithetical relationship to the world system and not in a conciliatory relationship.

John's Gospel chapter 16:8-11 informs us that the Spirit convicts the world:

And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>10</sup> concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup> concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

John's Gospel chapter 14:16-17 informs us that the world system cannot know the Spirit:

<sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, <sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.

First Corinthians chapter 2:12-14 informs us of the antithetical relationship between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world:

<sup>12</sup> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. <sup>13</sup> And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. <sup>14</sup> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

And again in the First Epistle of John chapter 4:2-3 the point is made:

<sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

John Chapter 15:26 sets forth this testimony of the Spirit to Jesus in the following way:

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

Within the culture of the gospel narratives, persons at court were not represented by highly qualified solicitors. Instead a judge adjudicated.<sup>202</sup> The function of a witness was that of testifying to the character of the accused. Only someone who had an intimate knowledge of the accused and could testify to his integrity was in a position to provide such a testimony. Insofar as the Holy Spirit's presence with and influence upon Jesus extended from his conception to his resurrection then he is supremely qualified to serve as the witness-advocate to his person and work. Clearly when the Bible sets forth the identity and ministry of the Holy Spirit it does so within a theological and interpretive framework that gives understanding and intelligibility to what is taking place. This same principle is true of all aspects of Christian religious experience and it is in the light of this that it is proper to speak of Christian exclusivism without conceding the pejorative or emotive associations that

---

<sup>202</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology*, 36-37.

John Hick attaches to the notion. As previously stated this, of course, is not to say that one cannot discover truth about God outside of Christianity.

## *Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks*

### *7.1 The Corpus of Hick's Writings*

Like the work of most innovative scholars, Professor Hick's writings have served as a catalyst for much discussion, and indeed span some forty years. The extent to which the corpus of his writings should be treated as a unified and coherent whole, has been something of a contentious issue among commentators. Some commentators hostile to the impression (conveyed by Hick himself) that his earlier and later theological and philosophical views can be harmonised into a single system, have insisted that the theology within his writings betrays an underlying discontinuity. Others take the view that Hick's theological journey to pluralism reflects a development in his theological thinking, although the word development can be understood in several ways. However, perhaps we do more justice to Hick by viewing him not as a theologian in any one tradition but essentially as a philosopher whose epistemology (originally considered within a Christian theological framework) remained largely consistent throughout his career, even as he moved beyond the theological framework of Christianity.

### *7.2 Hick's Defence of the Pluralistic Hypothesis*

Hick represented his pluralistic hypothesis as the best, and the most comprehensive and economical explanation of the facts of the history, viewed from a religious point of view. However he disliked the idea of his hypothesis being subject to criticism by those who

offered no alternative explanation and suggested that the only right response was to proffer another hypothesis.

Keith E. Yandell, responding to Hick's assertion writes:

I reject this notion of what "the right" response is. If I propose that the reason why our friend is putting cherry pies into the dishwasher is that she thinks the pies are prime numbers, you do not have to offer another hypothesis in order to show that my explanation will not work. Prime numbers are things you can move around.<sup>203</sup>

### *7.3 Hick's Engagement with Christian Theology*

The pluralistic hypothesis of Professor Hick also required that he become something of an expert in an enormous amount of religious and theological literature, as well as in several ancient and modern languages. Understandably, it was difficult for him to keep abreast of developments in all the varied fields of enquiry that impinged directly or indirectly upon his research. He believed that theologians lacked philosophical training but Hick had his own Achilles' heel. Commenting upon his engagement with evangelical Christianity, the branch of the Christian faith Hick claimed to know from inside his own experience, Alister McGrath writes:

I think Professor Hick is falling victim to the tendency to caricature, perhaps through a lack of familiarity with the enormous growth in serious evangelical academic

---

<sup>203</sup> Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 372

writing since 1980... At any rate I found his criticism of evangelicalism at this central and crucial point to be tired, uninformed and weary, and I wondered exactly whom he was criticising.<sup>204</sup>

He remained puzzled as to why the Christian faith in its exclusive form continued to be embraced by a wide range of academic philosophers, while his predictions of the demise of the Christian faith in the face of modern scientific enquiry as yet seems quite unfulfilled. Indeed, the Christian faith, even in its most simplistic form, continues to advance throughout the non-Western world and, this at a rate unparalleled in human history, while the Bible, is in constant demand with new versions and translations being produced at a prodigious rate.

He was somewhat disillusioned that the trend within Christian theological scholarship moved in the direction of inclusivism or accessibilism which merely distinguished between the ontological necessity of the work of Christ, and the epistemological necessity of hearing about and responding to it in an explicitly cognitive manner. This for Hick was something of a halfway house which conceded very little to his thesis. On the other hand if we are to measure his influence by the volume of discussion generated about the future hope of those who live without recourse to the Gospel message, then it is immense. Not only has

---

<sup>204</sup> Alister E. McGrath, "Response to John Hick", in Stanley N. Grundy, Denis L. Okholm, and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Salvation In A Pluralistic World*, 66-67.

Hick served as a catalyst in this regard but the recent field of enquiry has ranged from discussions on eschatology, to patristic theology, in an endeavour to explore the key issues raised in his writings.

Throughout his writings Hick seems to view the religious devotee who makes an absolute truth claim concerning his/her faith one who is lacking in humility. In other words one cannot hold one's belief with humility but can only do so in the absence humility. This charge was not of course one that was peculiar to Hick. Wilfred Cantwell Smith consistently spoke of what he regarded as the moral consequences of the traditional doctrinal teaching of the Church with regard to those outside of the Faith. Namely that it led to, and was fuelled by, an attitude of arrogance and was *ipso facto* un-Christian.

Thus he writes concerning the exclusivist salvific claims of the Church.

Let us leave aside for the moment any question of whether or not it is true. We shall return to that presently. My point here is simply that, in any case, it is arrogant. At least it becomes arrogant when one carries it out into the non-Western world.<sup>205</sup>

However as statistical research has demonstrated<sup>206</sup> consistently over the last 40 years, Christianity is in fact no longer rooted in the Western world but has relocated its centre to the non-Western world among the indigenous populations of the continent of Asia. Clearly

---

<sup>205</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity*, 14.

<sup>206</sup> David B. Barrett George T. Kurian Todd M. Johnson, eds. *World Christian Encyclopedia*.



the millions of converts to Christianity in Asia would not be happy to have their faith set forth in terms of Hick's pluralistic philosophy. Indeed the pluralistic philosophy imposed upon such indigenous faith and belief seems itself not too dissimilar to the western cultural arrogance he seemed to dislike so much.

#### *7.4 Hick's Contribution to Religious Epistemology*

Professor Hick's promotion of "warrant" grounded in "religious experience" as providing sufficient "grounds for faith" was something of a new departure in religious epistemology, and continues to be developed in these days. Had he chosen to stay within this narrower field of enquiry he would doubtless have occupied an extremely prestigious place in the field of epistemology.

#### *7.5 Hick's Critique of Christian History*

Professor Hick's contribution to Christianity also lay in his drawing attention to the demonstrable gulf that at times has existed between the truth confessed, and the truth modelled, by the Christian community, and this particularly in the western world. The unfortunate historical association of the Church with institutions of oppression, wedded to the absence of meaningful identification with the poor and marginalised, has contributed to the picture of a Church uncritically and theologically tied to the establishment. Admittedly, his criticisms were at times weakened by his tendency to broad generalizations. However,

Hick's voice, perhaps somewhat prophetic in this regard, was, and remains, one that must be listened to.

## *Bibliography*

Alston, William P. *Perceiving God*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Anderson, Pamela Sue and Bell, Jordan. *Kant and Theology*. London: T & T Clark International, 2010.

Bahnsen, Greg L. *Van Til's Apologetic – Readings & Analysis*. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1998.

Barrett, Michael P. V. *Complete In Him*. Greenville: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2000.

Barrett, David B. Kurian, George T. Johnson, Todd M., eds. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001.

Bavinck, Herman. *The Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977.

Bavinck, Herman. *Prolegomena*, Vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.

Bavinck, Herman. *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, Vol. 4 of *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.

Beeke, Joel R. and Jones, Mark. *A Puritan Theology*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974.

Bettenson, Henry. *The Early Church Fathers: A selection from the writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*. Edited and translated by Henry Bettenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). Volume 1. Translated by Henry Beveridge, 2 volumes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.

Clark, Gordon H. *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*. Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1968.

Clark, Gordon H. *The Johannine Logos*. Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1972.

Clark, Gordon H. *God's Hammer: The Bible and its Critics*. Jefferson: The Trinity Foundation, 1982.

Clark, Gordon H. *The Incarnation*. Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1988.

Clark, Kelly James., ed. *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journey of 11 Leading Thinkers*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993.

Clark, Gordon H. *Religion, Reason and Revelation*. New Mexico: The Trinity Foundation, 1995.

Clendenin, Daniel B. *Many Gods – Many Lords*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995.

Davies, Brian, ed. *Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Dunn, John D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. London: T. & T. Clark, 1998.

Dunn, James D. G. *Christology in the Making*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980.

Dunn, James D. G. *Christology of the New Testament*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980.

Eldon Ladd, Gordon. *A Theology of the New Testament*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1974.

Erickson, Millard J. *God The Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes*. Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1998.

Evans, C. Stephen. *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982.

Ferguson, Sinclair B. *The Holy Spirit – Contours of Christian Theology*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996.

Frame, John H. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987.

Frame, John H. *The Doctrine of God*. New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002.

Geisler, Norman. *Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.

Geisler, Norman and Feinberg, Paul D. *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.

Groothuis, Douglas. *Christian Apologetics*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.

Grunlan, Stephen A. and Mayers, Marvin K. *Cultural Anthropology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

Gundry, Stanley N., Okholm, Dennis L. and Phillips, Timothy R., eds. *Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

Grundy, Stanley N. and Demerist, Bruce, eds. *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

Harrison, Victoria S. *Religion and Modern Thought*. London: S.C.M. Press, 2007.

Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996.

Hegedus, Lorant. *A Study in the Concept of Transcendence in Contemporary German Theology*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1991.

Helm, Paul. *The Beginnings – Word & Spirit in Conversion*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986.

Henry, Carl F. H. *Revelation and Authority*. Vol.3, Waco: Word Books, 1979.

Hick, John. *The Christology of D. M. Baillie*. The Scottish Journal of Theology, March 1958.

Hick, John. *Christianity at the Centre*. London: Macmillan, 1968.

Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. London: Collins, 1970.

Hick, John. Pages 167-185 in *The Myth of God Incarnate*. London: SCM Press, 1972.

Hick, John. *God Has Many Names*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982.

Hick, John. *Faith and Knowledge*. London: Macmillan, 1988.

Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion*. London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

Hick, John. *Philosophy of Religion*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990.

Hick, John. *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications Ltd, 1993.

Hick, John. *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications Ltd., 2002.

Hick, John. *The Fifth Dimension*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications Ltd., 2004.

Hick, John. *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*. London: SCM Press, 2008.

Hick, John. *Who or What is God? And Other Investigations*. London: SCM Press, 2009.

Hick, John. *The New Frontier of Religion and Science – Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Hick, John. *Between Faith and Doubt – Dialogues on Religion and Reason*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Mentor New American Library, 1958.

Kaufman, Gordon D. *God the Problem*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1976.

Macleod, Donald. *Behold Your God*. Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1995.

Macleod, Donald. *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998.

McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988.

McGrath, Alister E. *Bridge-Building: Communicating Christianity Effectively*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992.

McGrath, Alister E. *A Passion for Truth*. Leicester: Apollos, 1997.

McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Mckim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Moreland, J. P. *Scaling the Secular City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987.

Morris, Thomas V. *Our Idea of God*. Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1991.

Murray, John. *Systematic Theology*. Volume 3 of Collected Writings. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963.

Nash, Ronald. H. *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

Nash, Ronald. *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

North, Gary. *Unconditional Surrender*. Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988.

Oppy, Graham and Scott, Michael, eds. *Reading Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Packer, J. I. *18 Words: The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know*. Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2007.

Plantinga, Alvin. *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*. London: Cornell University Press, 1967.

Plantinga, Alvin. *Does God Have a Nature?* Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980.

Plantinga, Alvin and Wolstertorff, Nicholas, eds. *Faith and Rationality*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Ridderboss, H. N. *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.

Sinkinson, Christopher. *The Universe of Faiths: A Critical Study of John Hick's Religious Pluralism*. Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 2001.



Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. "*The Christian in a Religiously Plural World*" in *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*. Edited by Willard Oxtoby. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. New York: Mentor Books, 1964.

Sosa, Ernest and Jaegwon, Kim, eds. *Epistemology: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Sproul, R. C., Gerstener, John and Lindsey, Arthur. *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defence of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

Swinburne, Richard. *The Coherence of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

Swinburne, Richard and Torrance, Thomas F. *Theological Science*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Swinburne, Richard. *Is there a God?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Tiessen, Terrance L. *Who Can Be Saved?* Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004.

Van Til, Cornelius. *The Defence of the Faith*. Philadelphia: P & R Publishing Company, 1967.

*Westminster Confession of Faith*: Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2006.

Willard, Dallas. *Personal Religion – Public Reality?* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009.

Yandell, Keith E. *Christianity and Philosophy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984.

Yandell, Keith E. *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Yandell, Keith E. *Philosophy of Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2007.