

Exclusivism in Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis

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In *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, John Hick presents an impressive theory of religious pluralism. His theory is intended to explain how it may be that all of the great religious traditions are essentially true despite their apparent contradictions. Hick points out that there are many religions in the world, each of which seems to be incompatible with others. For those who do not wish to deny that there is any truth in religion and at the same time do not wish to claim that one religion is true and all others delusory, there is, Hick says, a need for a pluralistic hypothesis—a hypothesis that would explain how different religions could be true.

Hick argues that we need a pluralistic hypothesis because it is unreasonably arbitrary to be religious exclusivists—that is, to accept the truth of our own religious tradition while denying that of other religious traditions. This follows because adherents of other religions have the exact same sort of justification for their religious beliefs that we have for our own—namely, religious experience (*Interpretation* 235). This assertion has been criticized, but for the sake of argument, I will assume that it is correct. However, since Hick only includes a few religions in his discussion, I will argue that his pluralistic hypothesis is guilty of the very same “unreasonable arbitrariness” for which he criticizes exclusivism. Thus, if Hick correctly supposes that we need a hypothesis that avoids this “implausible arbitrariness,” his own hypothesis is inadequate. I will consider two objections to my argument, and I will also suggest how Hick's hypothesis could be modified to overcome its inadequacy.

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Hick's Hypothesis

Hick argues that the universe is “religiously ambiguous” (*Interpretation* 73–124). This means that all of the features of the universe can be interpreted equally well naturalistically or religiously. There is no argument that provides any rational justification for believing that there are any gods, any supernatural forces, or any divine reality. Neither is there any argument that provides any rational justification for believing that any of these things does *not* exist. While Hick does not claim that any religious belief is true, he does argue that it is *rational* to hold religious beliefs on the basis of religious experience. He further argues that if we do so, we must accept others’ religious beliefs that they have formed on the basis of their own religious experience (*Interpretation* 235). This means it is rational to accept all religious beliefs that are based on religious experience.

But how can we do this if these religious beliefs contradict each other? Hick’s answer is that we can postulate that the various religions are all equally valid *interpretations* of the same divine reality. According to Hick’s hypothesis, there is a divine reality, which he calls “the Real” (*Interpretation* 236). The Real is ineffable, and we cannot experience this reality as it is any more than we can experience a table as it is. A table is empty space with subatomic particles bouncing around in it, but we don’t experience it that way. We experience it as a hard solid surface. In the same way, we experience the Real not as it is, but in whatever way we are capable of experiencing it. How we experience it depends on our culture, and since it is experienced differently in every culture, there are numerous religions. Still, each religion is an appropriate response to the Real (*Interpretation* 242–45, 248).

Yet how can we truly know that each religion is an appropriate response to the Real? Hick’s answer is that each religion effectively facilitates soteriological transformation. Soteriological transformation is what Hick calls the transformation “from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.” According to Hick, “ordinary human existence is defective, unsatisfactory, lacking” (*Interpretation* 32), and characterized by “misery, unreality, triviality, and perversity” (*Interpretation* 36). This is because people are self-centered rather than Reality-centered. People need to be saved or liberated from this state of affairs. The great religious traditions all recognize this and provide ways of accomplishing this soteriological transformation. Since all of the great traditions are successful in transforming and saving or liberating people, they are all appropriate responses to the Real (*Interpretation* 36, 307).

My Objection to Hick's Hypothesis

But why should we suppose that soteriological effectiveness is the right criterion for judging the appropriateness of a religion? The notion of soteriological transformation is not a universal feature of religion—far from it. It is unique to a particular type of religion, which Hick calls “post-axial religion” (*Interpretation* 28). This type of religion is a relatively recent phenomenon. It began, according to Hick, in the “axial age” (approximately 800 to 200 BCE). It seems to have had no existence before that, and although religions of this type have become dominant in the modern world, they are still not universal.

Hick's motivation for formulating a pluralistic hypothesis is to show how all religions that are based on religious experience can be compatible with each other (*Interpretation* 235). But a great deal of religious experience has occurred outside the context of soteriologically-oriented religions. Thus, in making soteriological effectiveness the criterion for judging the truth of religion, Hick's pluralism is actually very exclusive. As Keith Ward has argued, it is “exclusivism at a relatively abstract and general level” (111). Though Ward says that there is nothing wrong with excluding religions that are not soteriologically-oriented, there actually *is* something wrong with this proposition. Excluding pre-axial religions and other religions that say nothing about soteriology violates Hick's own reasoning regarding the need for the pluralistic hypothesis and commits Hick to the very arbitrariness he wants to avoid.

To see that this is so, let us more closely examine Hick's reasoning regarding the need for a pluralistic hypothesis. As previously mentioned, he argues that it is rational to hold religious beliefs that are based on religious experience. He argues for this by pointing out that we believe what our sense perceptions tell us is true about our physical environment. This is rational because it is also rational to accept what seems to be true in the absence of countervailing evidence. Thus, just as it is rational for us to accept our sense perceptions as veridical in the absence of countervailing evidence, it is rational for us to accept religious experience as veridical in the absence of countervailing evidence. “When someone believes in the existence of God on the basis of compelling religious experience, his or her belief is accordingly a case of rational or reasonable or well-founded belief” (*Interpretation* 221).

Hick notes that there are a variety of different religious traditions in which people have religious experience. It follows that it is rational for people in all these different traditions to believe that their experience is veridical. Furthermore, Hick argues that it is not reasonable for us to reject as delusory the religious experience taking place in these other

religious traditions if we accept the veridicality of that of our own tradition (*Interpretation* 235). This is because we can see that believers of other religions have the exact same sort of justification for their beliefs that we have for our own. It would be unreasonably arbitrary for us to say that our own religious experience is veridical and all others' religious experience is delusory. And this, according to Hick, is why we need a pluralistic hypothesis.¹ We need an account of how all the varieties of religious experience can be veridical, and his hypothesis is this: "The great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving, and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it" (*Interpretation* 236–37).

It seems odd that Hick includes only post-axial religions in his hypothesis. If the reason a pluralistic hypothesis is needed is because it is arbitrary and irrational to say one's own religious experience is veridical and all others' is delusory, the appropriate pluralistic hypothesis is "*All religions that are based upon religious experience* constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving, and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it." If Hick includes only post-axial religions in his hypothesis and excludes others in which people have religious experience, his hypothesis is inadequate. Hick does precisely what he says is unreasonable. He arbitrarily states that the religious experience that occurs in a particular *type* of religion is veridical while the religious experience of other traditions is not.

To see that Hick is, in fact, excluding religious experience that he should, by his own reasoning, include in his hypothesis, one can examine how he defines religious experience. He defines it as "modifications in the content of consciousness" in which "distinctively religious concepts are employed" (*Interpretation* 153). This includes visions and dreams in which such concepts are employed, as well as hearing voices, having mystical experiences, or having a sense of being in the presence of God or some other transcendent presence (*Interpretation* 103, 216).

Hick discusses at great length the religious experience of believers in post-axial religions. But believers in pre-axial religions also have these sorts of religious experiences. To see that this is so, one can consider a particular family of pre-axial religion, the religions of the Native Americans. These religions are heavily based on visionary experience. The Native Americans experience spontaneous religious visions, and they also actively seek out

¹ Of course, the soundness of this argument for the need for a pluralistic hypothesis can be—and has been—questioned. But in this paper I am assuming, for the sake of argument, that the argument is sound.

such visions (Lyon 20). During these visions, they hear voices and see spirits who communicate with them. William S. Lyon writes:

The Earth People see the visionary experience as a form of communication with the Creator through divine intermediaries, called spirits, and thus they attribute great value to such experiences . . . The vision questing process is capable of inducing an intense ecstatic trance that should be [sic] seen as a religious vision in the truest sense. Certainly the after-effects on the individual shaman can readily be equated with the after-effects of the religious vision on saints from other religions . . . Shamans often speak of the sheer beauty of their visionary experiences, the wonderful feeling it gives them, and how the world is bathed in a radiant light. (21)

It is also clear that Native Americans “experience religiously,” to use Hick’s words. Lyon clearly shows that the Native Americans carefully observe the world around them and experience this world spiritually (20).

These experiences are not unique to Native Americans. For example, shamans among Australian aborigines do something called “merging with the dreaming” (Hume 12), which involves speaking with the spirits of deceased persons. This communication with the spirit world occurs when shamans have experiences of leaving their bodies. Also, the Dagara of Africa practice an initiation rite that involves staring at a tree and waiting for a vision. Malidoma Patrice Somé of the Dagara writes that during his initiation he experienced a vision in which the tree he gazed at was replaced before his eyes with a tall green woman who filled him with transcendent love and happiness (220–22).

Clearly religious experience is in no way limited to practitioners of post-axial religion. Considering that members of indigenous societies also “experience religiously,” they are, according to Hick’s reasoning, rational to accept this experience and to live their lives accordingly. It follows that it is unreasonable for us to deny the veridicality of their religious experience as long as we accept the veridicality of our own experiences, for “the only reason for treating one’s tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own” (*Interpretation* 235). It is therefore curious that Hick says that the “third possibility” (the other two possibilities being the view that all religious experience is delusory and “the dogmatic view that it is all delusory” except for one’s own form of it) is that “*the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it*” (*Interpretation* 235–36, my italics). In restricting his hypothesis to only the great post-axial faiths, Hick arbitrarily

affirms the veridicality of the religious experiences in one form of religion while denying the veridicality of others. This, of course, is precisely what his hypothesis is supposed to avoid.

Why does Hick exclude pre-axial religion? The reason seems to be that these religions are not soteriologically-oriented, and it does seem to be true that they generally are not. Practitioners of pre-axial religions seem to have, as Hick says, affirmed earthly life rather than viewing it as “defective, unsatisfactory, lacking,” miserable, unreal, trivial, and perverse (*Interpretation* 28, 32, 36), and thus they apparently did not yearn for salvation or liberation from life. Though the religions of these people were concerned with ethics, they were not dedicated to radically transforming people, nor were they concerned with transcending earthly life to achieve some infinitely preferable future existence (*Interpretation* 28).

The Lakota, for example, did not conceive of the afterlife as a limitlessly better quality of existence. They conceived of it as being similar to earthly life, the primary difference being that the dead were in no danger of experiencing misfortunes such as starvation or war (Bonvillain 221). This would be a better quality of existence, but not necessarily a “limitlessly” better one, and it would certainly not be a radical “transformation of the human situation.” Yet Hick’s criterion for the legitimacy of a religion is its soteriological effectiveness. How “true” a religion is can be judged by how effectively it converts people to Reality-centeredness and allows them to achieve an infinitely better state of being (*Interpretation* 36, 248, 300). In recognizing that pre-axial religions were not soteriologically-oriented, Hick likely believes that they did absolutely nothing to promote a transformation: “[Pre-axial] religious activity is concerned to keep fragile human life on an even keel; but it is not concerned, as is post-axial religion, with its radical transformation” (*Interpretation* 23).

The problem is that Hick never gives any reason for thinking that soteriological effectiveness is the right criterion for judging the appropriateness of a religion.² He simply asserts it. His claim is either an arbitrary assumption or it is based on the following circular reasoning: because the post-axial religions are all soteriologically effective, the criterion for the truthfulness of religion is soteriological effectiveness. This is clearly circular because to use “Post-axial religions are all soteriologically effective” as a justification for “The criterion for truthfulness is soteriological effectiveness” is to assume that the soteriological effectiveness present in post-axial religions is the correct criterion for judging religions. If we do not assume that soteriological effectiveness is the correct criterion for judging the

² At least, he does not seem to do so in *An Interpretation of Religion*. He does, in a later book, attempt to justify the soteriological criterion. I deal with this attempt in the next section.

truthfulness of a religion, we will not view the presence of this feature in post-axial religions as evidence that they are truthful. Further, if we do not regard these religions as truthful, we will not be able to use the claim that they are soteriologically effective as evidence that soteriological effectiveness is the correct criterion for truthfulness. This kind of reasoning gives no justification whatsoever for rejecting pre-axial religions as a less appropriate response to the Real than post-axial religions.

Thus, Hick's exclusion of non-soteriologically-oriented religions is unjustified. Any pluralistic hypothesis that fulfills the need Hick sees for such a hypothesis would have to include all human religious experience, not just the experience that has occurred in one particular type of religion.

Objections to My Argument

It is unclear what Hick believes to be the nature of pre-axial religion and its relationship to the Real. At one point he discusses the "axial shift to soteriology" as a "discovery of the transcendent" (*Interpretation* 30), which suggests that he views pre-axial religion as being delusory and *not* an experience of the Real. As I have argued, this violates his own rule. But later he explains that when members of pre-axial societies felt obligations to their society, this was because they sensed the existence of the Real (*Interpretation* 308). This suggests that he believes that pre-axial religion *does* have at least some element of experience of the Real.

One could argue that I have been unfair to Hick in claiming that his hypothesis rejects pre-axial religious experience as delusory. Perhaps a charitable interpretation requires that I not make such an assertion when Hick hints that he may believe pre-axial religious experience to be veridical. But if this is his belief, his hypothesis should be more inclusive. If pre-axial religious experience is veridical, pre-axial religions also constitute ways of experiencing, conceiving, and living in relationship to the divine Reality. So by restricting his theory to the great post-axial faiths—instead of something like "human religions"—Hick is clearly excluding pre-axial religions and implying that they are delusory.

There is also an argument that Hick makes which might be taken as an objection to my argument. In "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Response to Gavin D'Costa," Hick defends his exclusion of religions outside the great post-axial traditions. He claims that in using the soteriological criterion, he is using a criterion which "represents the basic moral consensus of all the great world faiths. [It is] common to . . . Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam." He further justifies his position as follows:

But why select *these* particular traditions . . . as providing the right criterion? The answer arises out of the route by which the pluralistic hypothesis is arrived at It originates within a particular religious tradition—in my own case Christianity. As a Christian, then, one accepts that the sense of the presence of God . . . is indeed an awareness of a divine presence; and one sees as confirmation of this the self-evidently valuable and desirable “fruit of the Spirit” which St. Paul listed as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. . . .

One then becomes aware that there are other great religious traditions within which people conceive and experience the Divine/Ultimate/Real differently, but the moral and spiritual fruits of which nevertheless seem to be essentially similar to those of Christian faith and experience. And so one extends to them the basic faith that their religious experience also is a cognitive response to a transcendent reality. (*Dialogues* 172-73)

According to Hick, the reason for selecting particular religions as “providing the right criterion” lies in the reasoning that leads one to pluralism. This reasoning is something like the following:

- (1) My own religious experience is an authentic cognitive response to a transcendent reality.
- (2) There are other religions in which people have religious experiences that lead them to believe in a transcendent reality.
- (3) Since these religious experiences give them the same justification for their beliefs that I have for my own, I should accept that their religions are also authentic cognitive responses to a transcendent reality.

According to Hick, “religious experience and its fruits in life cohere; for if the fruits in this case were hatred, misery, aggression, unkindness, impatience, violence and lack of self-control, this would lead us to deny the authenticity of the experience” (*Dialogues* 173). In other words, if the “fruits” of my religious experience were these negative things, I would take this to be a defeater to my belief that (1) is true. I would not believe (1), and so I would never get to (3). Without this ethical criterion, we would not accept our own religion in the first place, much less come to be pluralists. We are therefore justified in using this criterion to judge religions.

Hick makes this argument in order to justify the exclusion of such “religions” as Satanism and Nazism, and this is understandable. The position that Satanism and Nazism are authentic responses to the divine reality is certainly an unattractive one and one that we should avoid. The important thing to note is that this argument could not justify the exclusion of pre-axial religions because the “fruits” of pre-axial religious experience are not evil (at least in many cases). Even if one wanted to say that they were, one could not coherently argue that this would lead practitioners of pre-axial religion to reject their religious experience. Clearly practitioners of pre-axial religion do *not* deny the validity of their experience; they accept it. If they denied it, there would never have been any pre-axial religion. So whether or not Hick is correct that negative “fruits” will lead one to deny the validity of their religious experience, there is no defeater to (1). If we arrive at (3), it will be without any justification for using a criterion that excludes pre-axial religion.

It is also important to note here the distinction between ethical and soteriological criteria. Even if Hick’s argument were sound, it would only justify using an ethical criterion, not necessarily a soteriological one. Ethics has to do with what is good and what is right. Soteriology has to do not just with what is good and right, but also with the notion of salvation and liberation. Though pre-axial religions are not concerned with soteriology, they *are* concerned with ethics. To take just one example, again from Native Americans, Howard Harrod writes that “religious experience forms moral attitudes and dispositions” among Native Americans (qtd. in Lyon 21). So even if we grant Hick’s argument for using the ethical criterion, there is still no reason to exclude pre-axial religions, despite their lack of soteriological concern. If we are going to, as Hick suggests, “obey the intellectual Golden Rule of granting to others a premise on which we rely ourselves” and not “claim that our own form of religious experience . . . is veridical whilst the others are not” (*Interpretation* 235), we must recognize the validity of not just the great religious traditions, but also pre-axial religions and indeed all religions that are based upon religious experience.

Conclusion

There is, of course, nothing unique to Hick about overlooking or discounting pre-axial religions. In the debate about the philosophical problem of religious diversity, discussion has been limited almost entirely to the great post-axial traditions. Indigenous religions have, as George Mavrodes says of polytheism, “not gotten a fair shake in the philosophical casino; indeed, [they have] hardly gotten any shake at all” (139). The assumption

seems to be that the only religions worth taking seriously are the great post-axial religions of our own civilized culture.

This assumption needs to be challenged. Hick's argument for pluralism is interesting in that it shows *exactly why* we should challenge the assumption and then fails to challenge it. Yet the argument is still significant; Hick correctly identifies that practitioners of other religions have the same justification for their beliefs that one has for his own beliefs. This shows us that one needs to take other religions seriously instead of ignoring or dismissing them.

However, if the Christian needs to take the Hindu's vision of Vishnu seriously, if the Hindu needs to take Muhammad's hearing the voice of God seriously, and if the Muslim needs to take the Buddhist's mystical experience seriously, then there is no reason that excuses any of these faiths from taking the Dagara's vision of the green woman or the Lakota's vision of spirits seriously.

The typical oversight of indigenous religions among philosophers is especially unfortunate given what these religions may have to teach us. Just as the teachings of the Buddha teach us about serenity, and just as the stories of Christ's ministry teach us about compassion, indigenous religions may contain their own valuable teachings. This is something that Hick does recognize. He writes that in archaic religions there was "an affirmation of earthly life and a natural acceptance of death which have been largely lost since the discovery of sin and salvation, *avidya* and illumination," as well as "a sense of continuity with other forms of life and of the living unity of nature, which might restrain our ecologically destructive uses of the environment," and "a sense of the moral reality of community, which might moderate our now extreme western individualism" (*Interpretation* 28-29). The potentially valuable teachings of archaic religions as well as the powerful religious experiences that followers undergo give philosophers ample reason to give pre-axial religions a closer look.

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