

Soteriology and the Philosophical Theology of John Hick (I)

Alan P. Williams

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of two introductory papers in which I will be examining the philosophical theology of John Hick. Ranging from the doctrine of creation to eschatology, Hick, being a prolific writer, has written extensively on almost all the central themes that appear in any serious philosophical discussion of theology. This paper will focus on a very small aspect of his systematic thought. I will, after examining his soteriology, refer to two themes (namely religious pluralism and the nature of religious faith) which hold an important place within his philosophical system. The exposition of both of these two themes raises epistemological problems which Hick attempts to solve by resorting to his account of soteriology. The purpose of this paper is to examine why, given his philosophical position, these problems arise, and how soteriology is supposed to solve them.

1. HICK'S CONCEPTION OF SOTERIOLOGY

Pre-axial religion (or archaic religion) purports to give meaning to the basic conditions of human existence (subsistence, propagation, birth, death) by resorting to a mythical picture or vision of the universe and our place in it. This picture

helps unite the people who endorse it, for they accept a common world-view that gives purpose and meaning to their personal and social existence. More importantly, the mythical picture can justify the community's claims upon the loyalty of its members.

Hick contends that archaic religion aims to bring social cohesion and stability to communal life by withholding religious criticisms that may imply how social life can be transformed for the better. It simply wants to "keep the life of the community on an even keel and the fabric of society intact." (1989, p 28) Archaic religion, given this conservative outlook, doesn't promise a limitlessly better quality of existence that is impervious to the sufferings and tragedies of our human predicament. It expects the adherents to endure their conditions in life with stoic forbearance.

With the gradual emergence of the axial religions, however, we witness a significant change in religious mentality, a "paradigm shift" in religious thought. Unlike archaic religion, the axial religions not only jointly depict, in a manner always vivid and realistic, the actuality and reality of human life, but offer ruthless, poignant criticisms of the utter depravity of our spiritual state. For the axial religions, life is pervaded by inexplicable pain and suffering, life's satisfactions fleeting and unreliable, while the human will is totally trapped in sin. Yet this pessimistic conception of the "misery, unreality, triviality and perversity of ordinary human life" (1989, p 36) is not by any means their final estimate. For they promise a state of spiritual fulfillment (defined differently as nirvana, moksha, children of God, etc) devoid of the salient features that characterize our social and personal existence, and the religious means (though again different spiritual paths are proposed such as life dedicated to Christ, contemplative meditation, faithful obedience to the Torah, etc) for achieving this end. That is, notwithstanding their critical estimate of our spiritual condition, the religious traditions stipulate different spiritual paths which, if we enter with unconditional dedication and commitment, can save

us from a life riddled with sin. Thus, for Hick, the great religious traditions that came into existence during the axial period, thereby establishing the major religious options available for humanity, offer ways for attaining salvation. It is the ultimate religious significance ascribed to salvation that distinguishes them from archaic religion. But more importantly, by promising the possibility of receiving our highest spiritual good, “the message of each of the great religions constitutes good news for humankind.” (1999, p 52)

Granting the apparent differences in their respective conceptions of the ultimate state of salvation, and the different spiritual paths that must be experienced to achieve genuine fulfillment, Hick, given his pluralistic understanding of religion, painstakingly articulates the common fundamental soteriological structure that is exhibited by the different world religions. What then is the common soteriological structure? Hick argues that the world religions affirm the existence of an ultimate, divine, benign, transcendent reality that sustains and redeems the world. This Reality, though conceptualized and experienced in different ways, is the common intentional object or referent of every authentic religious devotion, worship, and thinking. The path to salvation consists in our voluntary choice of joyfully entering a form of life that requires the total abdication of ego-centric thoughts, feelings, and deeds (which ordinarily govern personal existence) by orienting our lives to this Reality with utmost commitment and seriousness. The process to salvation amounts to the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.” (1989, p 36) Life centered upon this Reality will ultimately fulfill our potential as spiritual beings, and will gratify every genuine spiritual yearning. Appertaining to widely different theological schemes and matrices, the concrete spiritual paths for salvation commended by the different religions might at first seem different or even incommensurate. Yet if Hick’s analysis is viable, the apparent differences are simply different theological formulations of the same spiritual pilgrimage that is necessary for salvation.

Even if we were to concur with the notion of there being a single way of characterizing the seemingly divergent paths to salvation, would this imply a single, exhaustive characterization of the final state of being saved that could entail the seemingly different soteriological conjectures we find in different religious traditions? Simplifying the soteriological scenarios, we have, within the Semitic tradition, the general inclination to view the final state as a form of existence where we are expected to experience eternal communion with God, whereas within the Eastern tradition, it is not so much a communion as an existential identification of oneself with ultimate reality (thereby dissolving the reality of our personal identities as such) which constitutes the eventual eschatological experience. Given these different theological speculations, Hick thinks that we should simply admit that the final state will “prove to be beyond the horizon of our present powers of imagination.” (1985, p 124) But as the process of ego-transcendence continues, he believes that our experience of the Real will become richer and deeper, enabling a stronger and more lasting sense of the presence and the reality of the Real than what we currently experience.

Although a committed Christian, Hick’s soteriology is markedly different from the orthodox doctrine of salvation. For orthodox soteriology, salvation and atonement are inseparable from each other. Atonement refers to a particular mode of receiving salvation and presupposes an existential barrier that separates humanity from God. Sin is this barrier, and it is through the atonement brought by the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross that expiates human sin, thus reestablishing the normative relationship humanity experienced prior to the fall. “The basic notion is then that salvation requires God’s forgiveness and that this in turn requires an adequate atonement to satisfy the divine righteousness and/or justice.” (1993 b, p 112) But traditional soteriology is not accepted by Hick, for it ascribes universal and cosmic significance to the atonement brought by Jesus, implying his blood on the cross as the only means (or the most adequate amongst other possible means)

for establishing the proper relationship between God and humanity. As we shall see in the following section, the exclusivist or inclusivist implication of orthodox soteriology isn't consistent with his doctrine of religious pluralism.

2. SOTERIOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Hick's religious pluralism is heavily indebted to two epistemological principles we find in Kant's philosophy of knowledge. In order, therefore, to appreciate his line of reasoning, a very brief exposition of these principles will be given before actually examining the way in which Hick relates soteriology with his understanding of religious pluralism.

For Kant, the mind, contrary to empiricist epistemology, does not passively await the vast array of sensory input from the phenomenal world of experience. It actively contributes to the construction of human experience by imposing concepts (such as causality and substance) that are not deducible from experience. The concepts, which are the inbuilt cognitive machinery of the mind, help organize and construct the sensory information we receive. Without the imposition of these a priori concepts, our experience of the world would lack the structure and unity that make empirical knowledge possible. The condition for knowledge, therefore, is the cognitive contribution sensory information receives from innate concepts of the mind.

The concepts which are instrumental for empirical knowledge can not be applied to that which transcends both actual and possible sense experience. The concepts that form our mental apparatus are designed to yield empirical knowledge, and if they are applied beyond the limits of human experience, they are required to undertake a cognitive task which they are not designed to fulfill. Thus, the a priori concepts can not give us knowledge of that which transcends the domain of empirical cognition and discourse. But this doesn't imply that such a re-

ality (or noumenon) doesn't exist. What is or isn't capable of being known by our cognitive faculties doesn't determine, for Kant, the separate ontological problem concerning what can and can not exist. The noumenon, or that which is independent of human perception or conception, exists, notwithstanding our utter cognitive incapability of characterizing it in any way. It is an ineffable reality that theoretically precludes the attribution of both positive and negative characteristics.

Hick accepts the ontological reality of the Kantian noumenon. (Hick terms this the Real or Reality.) Following Kant, the Real as it is in itself is ineffable, transcending the realm of human thought and experience. "Thus the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purposive or non-purposive, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many." (1995, p 27) The significance of the Real is not restricted to that of philosophy alone. It has a religious significance which far outweighs the putative solutions or clarification of perennial philosophical issues. The significance is due both to the world religions' existential affirmation of or an ontological commitment to the Real, and an espousal of a religious form of life that has the Real as its ethical foundation. Be that as it may, the nature of the Real as ineffable hasn't prevented the world religions from conceiving it in different ways. They all, in some shape or form, propose theological models which they think, however inadequately, picture or reflect the essential nature of the Real. Various religious traditions employ religious models (Jahweh, Heavenly Father, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu, etc) to give a personal characterization of the Real, while other traditions picture the Real in terms of non-personal, metaphysical models (such as Brahman, Dharmakaya, Tao, etc). Furthermore, notwithstanding their understanding of the nature of the Real, the world religions have all expounded theological doctrines and mythic stories (ranging from the creation myths to eschatological speculations) that either directly or indirectly relate to the Real. Thus, we have a proliferation of different (or we might even say contradictory) theological systems that purport to characterize the Real in

ways that are deemed adequate and coherent for those who accept the religious tradition from which a given system arises.

But given the nature of the Real, there seems to lack the epistemic justification for assuming that any one of these models, and their related theological doctrines, can purport to reflect the Real. If ineffability and transcendence are what characterize the Real, then we might have to conclude that religious concepts (no matter how refined, complex, or cogent) can't mirror what the Real is.

The correspondence criterion claims that we have the epistemic warrant for believing the truth of any given proposition or theory P provided that what P maintains corresponds to the way things actually are, and conversely, we lack this epistemic warrant if this condition is not satisfied. The criterion presupposes that the truth of P can be confirmed or falsified by comparing the empirical or theoretical implications of P with the datum of both actual and possible experience.

Ranging from simple descriptive statements to abstract scientific hypotheses, the criterion does seem to give a plausible account of how putative knowledge claims are usually attested. We verify, for example, the truth claim of such a simple descriptive statement as "Tom bought a new book yesterday" by comparing the implications deducible from the truth of this statement with what Tom actually did. In this case, the truth-condition for this statement will be Tom actually buying a book. When verifying scientific hypotheses, the scientific community will usually draw empirical implications from a given hypothesis and examine whether or not they correspond to the way the world is objectively structured. So far so good. But the criterion doesn't seem to hold water when applied to religious assertions about the Real. It is, given the transcendental nature of the Real, theoretically impossible to compare and contrast the assertions with that which is beyond our ken. Unlike putative assertions about the world, where the actual correspondence that does or doesn't obtain between linguistically framed assertions and the world can be ascertained, alleged cognitive claims of the Real can not be verified by

means that are (in most cases) deemed to be adequate.

Accepting this problem implied by the correspondence criterion, some opt for the notion of coherence as a philosophically more viable way of justifying the contention that religious concepts are somehow in alignment with the Real. The proponents of this criterion assert that if a given system of beliefs P about Q is coherent (meaning that the network of beliefs within P coheres systematically after rigorous testing and criticism), then we have the epistemic warrant in believing that P is true with respect to Q. The truth of P, therefore, is not ascertained by determining whether P corresponds to what it purports to explain or account for. We have the epistemic warrant to infer the truth of P from the coherence of P. But coherence as a criterion for epistemic warrant faces the same charge that was raised against the correspondence criterion. Coherence might have epistemic value for ascertaining the validity of belief systems that have the world of experience as their object of inquiry. We would accept the truth of P provided that beliefs within P are systematic and coherent, and would (or would at least try to) amend any incongruity we find in light of Q. We would, furthermore, incline to suspend judgment concerning the truth of P if we fail to amend the incongruities that are not compatible with Q. But when the coherence criterion is applied to the Real, it faces serious (if not insurmountable) problems. First of all, the different doctrinal beliefs of the Real that are accepted by the various religious traditions each form (as far as we can tell) a consistent web of belief that gives meaning and purpose for their adherents. If the coherence criterion is accepted, we have theologically incompatible belief systems that are on a par. This conclusion seems to invite a form of religious relativism which is surely detrimental to theological thinking. Secondly, we seem to lack epistemic warrant for thinking that any of the religious traditions, with their doctrinal beliefs of the Real, are coherent, for these beliefs purport to account for that which is beyond human conception. It seems, therefore, that the correspondence and coherence criteria can not fulfill the

role of conferring epistemic justification for believing that our religious concepts and models are in tune with the Real. Contrary to the unconditional commitment to and the strong cognitive assurance of living with the presence of the Real, it seems that religious agnosticism is the only viable option available for those who embrace a religious form of life.

Religious agnosticism is further insinuated by Hick's overall acceptance of Kant's epistemological principle that our cognitive concepts condition, organize, and construct our experience of the world. Religious perception or conception doesn't exist in a vacuum. There exists a myriad of contingent non-religious factors that jointly contribute to the making of religious understanding. Religious reality is thought of and experienced by us "through the spectacles of our religious categories ; and these...vary significantly from one culture to another." (1993 a, p 7) The historical and cultural context in which religious understanding is embedded implies, at times, the uncritical acceptance of metaphysical presuppositions which function as major premises for much theoretical thinking. These presuppositions color our vision and shape our understanding of the world to the extent in which it becomes theoretically difficult to question these assumptions or even appreciate conceptions that don't correspond to our metaphysical commitments. Besides metaphysical presuppositions, religious traditions often inherit the socio-cultural values that form the fabric of the society in which they are born and nurtured. These values are often incorporated into their belief systems and are at times made sacrosanct. Moreover, contingent religious factors help shape the doctrinal beliefs shared by a given religious tradition. Although founders of religion (Christ, Mohammed, etc) are inclined to be highly critical of religious beliefs accepted and shared by their contemporaries, their religious thinking, nonetheless, is influenced (if not determined) by these beliefs. The reality is that their religious insight or vision partially transcends, yet is founded upon, a given religious superstructure.

Now, these factors are conducive to the making of a given religious apparatus that enables the adherents to experience and conceive the world religiously. That is, concepts and models of a religious nature are invoked to make religious sense of the Real and the world we live in. But one might question this ability if they are nothing but historical and cultural by-products, reflecting the historical and cultural context in which they are formed. Religious concepts, so the argument goes, are nothing more than the creation or projection of historical and cultural forces, giving us insights into the workings of human history, culture, and psychology, but not insights into the mechanics of the Real.

But Hick doesn't draw this agnostic conclusion. To be sure, the transcendent nature of the Real and the cultural and historical conditioning of much religious understanding are accepted by Hick. Yet Hick believes that the religious concepts and models which we find in different religious traditions mediate the Real in different yet appropriate ways. They function respectively as a medium for a reality that is beyond the confines of a naturalistic ontology. This is made possible by the revelatory nature of the Real. The Real reveals or manifests itself in and through the different possible mediums in the world (historical events, natural phenomena, people, etc), and the revelation is responded to and conceptualized by utilizing the religious concepts which we find within the different religious traditions. If the revelatory experience cannot be conceived properly by the existing religious vocabulary, new religious concepts might be invented or the available concepts might be given a new meaning that accord with the revelatory experience. True, revelation (and the cognitive response to it), doesn't disclose the transcendental nature of the Real, but it nevertheless reveals the phenomenal and immanent nature of the Real. The religious concepts conceptualize the way the Real impinges upon our religious sensibility. The different conceptual schemes advocated by different religious traditions characterize and expound the ways their religious sensibilities have been affected by the phenomenal dimension of the Real. The

conceptual schemes “represent the Real as both reflected and refracted within human thought and experience...The Real is the ultimate ground...which characterize each divine persona and impersona insofar as these are authentic phenomenal manifestations of the Real.” (1989, p 247)

What epistemic justification is there for thinking that our religious concepts are somehow in alignment with the transcendental nature of the Real? For Hick, the *raison d'être* of religion is to provide salvation to those who accept the religious form of life. This, as we have seen, consists in the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. The world religions, each within their respective cultural and historical context, have expounded religious beliefs and concepts which would be instrumental for achieving this end. These concepts and beliefs, significantly different across the world religions, are in alignment with the transcendent Real in so far as they help promote the salvific transformation for those who embrace the religious life.

The Real, being ineffable, has a depth and richness that is forever beyond any doctrinal formulation. Nevertheless, the different doctrinal formulations we find give us complementary pictures of the transcendent nature of the Real. Though we lack the cognitive resources for comparing and contrasting the religious concepts with their intentional object (thus denying the theoretical viability of the correspondence and coherence criteria), we have the epistemic justification for thinking that they are in alignment with the Real provided that they are conducive to salvific transformation.

Hick's contention is that the world religions provide equally valid contexts for salvific transformation. The contention is based upon the empirical fact that people now, and in the past, achieve this transformation within their respective religious traditions. The salvific transformation of individuals is measured in terms of their spiritual and moral fruits. Their existential alignment with the Real will result in their loving and compassionate behavior toward their neighbors. Insofar

as a given religious tradition produces adherents that manifest such behavior, it is responding to and is in alignment with the Real. Because the moral and spiritual fruits of the world faiths are on a par, thus not singling out one tradition as being more morally praiseworthy, Hick believes that they are all equally valid contexts for salvation, and are equally in cognitive alignment with the Real. As Hick formulates his pluralist position, "The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human ; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place." (1989, p 240) Thus, it is, for Hick, theologically inappropriate to restrict both the actuality and possibility of salvation to any one given religious tradition.

3. SOTERIOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS FAITH

Religious faith has been characterized in different ways. We have the rather intellectualistic yet common understanding of faith as that of giving intellectual assent to supernaturally revealed theological dogma. We also have the ethos of neo-orthodox theology with its rediscovery of the existential aspect of faith. Faith here is not so much an affair of the mind, but an existential commitment to and the obedient trust in the Word of God. We also find in the writings of religious skeptics the rather standard definition of faith as an intellectual assent given to religious propositions that are not firmly based on verifiable evidence.

Religious faith, for Hick, is a cognitive mode of experiencing phenomena (objects, events, situations, people, etc) religiously. Faith acts as a cognitive filter by ascribing religious significance to phenomena ; it interprets phenomena as mediating or disclosing a religious reality. This form of interpretation requires the application of religious concepts which are shared within a given religious tradition.

The religious sense we make of the world creates a religious dimension that is grafted upon any given phenomenon that in itself lacks religious significance. Religious significance is not simply a human construct that doesn't have any bearing on the objective nature of the world. Though mediated by the world, religious faith, for Hick, is a cognitive response to a transcendent reality that exists independent of human cognition.

Hick believes that religious faith shares an epistemic structure with both the ethical and aesthetic modes of awareness. In ethical awareness, we impose the relevant ethical concepts to phenomena and thereby bestow ethical significance to that which alone lacks this level of meaning. The bestowal of ethical meaning will introduce an ethical dimension to our cognitive awareness, thus altering our vision of the world. The ethical level of significance, moreover, is not "forced upon us from outside, but depends on an inner capacity and tendency to interpret in this way, a tendency which we are free to oppose and even to overrule." (1974, p 112) Situations which would ordinarily demand moral action can be dismissed as morally irrelevant. Likewise, in aesthetic awareness, we make aesthetic sense of our world by bestowing aesthetic meaning to it. Again, this cognitive response to our world is voluntary, and it is unforced upon our awareness. Religious faith resembles these two cognitive responses in the sense that they are all meaning-bestowing activities which we can voluntarily choose to accept or not.

Hick's account of faith can be illustrated with examples. Within the Christian tradition, the sacraments hold an important part of religious experience and worship. The ordinary material object, whether it be bread, wine, or water, becomes a focus of intense consciousness of God's overwhelming presence and purpose. The sacramental objects, lacking intrinsic religious significance, are conceived religiously by resorting to the religious concepts shared within the Christian tradition. The second example is that primary instance of faith in the New Testament of conceiving Jesus as the Christ. The faith of his disciples, which was epito-

mized in Peter's confession, was their experience of following Jesus, and a religious conviction that he was mediating the presence of God's personal purpose and love. But this conviction wasn't shared by everyone who encountered him. Indeed, some saw him as a radical political agitator, while others conceived him as a false prophet or an unorthodox rabbi trying to subvert the religious order of the day. Now, the point is that Jesus was, is, and will be conceived as both lord and savior by those who ascribe religious significance to his works and teachings while others not sharing this commitment will not interpret him as having religious significance. The third example, which again is taken from the Christian tradition, is the religious significance the church has for its adherents. The church, from a secular standpoint, is just one of many other institutions that exist to promote a cause which it deems to be of great importance. The church, given this understanding, will be nothing more than a religious institution with a mission to promote religious values. But this doesn't in any way give us an exhaustive account of the Christian understanding of the church. The church, being the "body of Christ", is the focal point of the sacred workings of the Holy Spirit, disclosing the presence of Christ and God through the sacraments and the preaching of the gospel. Furthermore, doctrinal truth is embodied partly in the Holy Spirit with the implication that the church, without it, is open to heretical dogma. The religious significance of the church, like the other examples we have seen, is superimposed upon a level of meaning that is devoid of the religious.

The religious interpretation of any given phenomenon doesn't preclude the possibility of an interpretation that doesn't rely on religious categories. Phenomena can be interpreted religiously or naturalistically. Examples might clarify this point. The order and intrinsic interrelatedness of our natural environment might lend support to a religious reality that is responsible for its creation. Yet a naturalistic understanding can accept the order of nature without interpreting it religiously. Our moral experiences of right and wrong, and the moral conscience

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which often stipulates the course of action which is morally desirable, might imply the existence of a sovereign, divine lawmaker revealing and working itself in and through the moral dimension. The same moral phenomena can, however, be understood naturalistically, resorting to sociological or biological explanations. Alleged mystical experiences of a transcendent being can also be interpreted in terms of a naturalistic understanding of human psychology, where the religious dimension is left out of the picture. Though different in terms of their theoretical explanations of phenomena, the naturalistic and religious understanding of the world are equally viable and coherent interpretations. Hick doesn't think that the validity of either a religious or naturalistic understanding can be substantiated in terms of their success or failure of explaining the workings of the world. Hick writes, "We are in fact able to exclude the entire religious dimension, experiencing only such form of meaning as can enter through the filter of a naturalistic world-view." (1989, p 161)

Contrary to much theological thinking, if both the religious and naturalistic account of the world are different yet equally viable modes of explanation, the validity of a religious world-view can not be substantiated in terms of natural theology or by appealing to the canons of deductive logic. In natural theology, we have the attempt to deduce the existence of a divine reality from the realm of experience. The intricate order and the complex yet coherent structure of the world often function as major premises from which a divine architect responsible for this creation is empirically inferred. The purposeful nature of the world, where we find the fascinatingly subtle adaptations of species to their natural surroundings, is again used as a source from which a divine and purposeful being is inferred. On the other hand, we have the conceptual and deductive method of deducing the existential reality of a divine being by applying the canons and principles of formal logic to the conceptual content implied by formal definitions of God. Hick claims that the philosophical endeavor of proving either empirically or logically the exist-

ence of a divine reality is, at best, the attempt to articulate in philosophical terms the nature and content of religious faith, and therefore cannot establish the validity of faith by impartially revealing the nature and reality of a divine being. None of these arguments “seems qualified to compel belief in God in the mind of one who lacks that belief.” (1973, p 30) The naturalistic understanding of the world can not be undermined by subtle philosophical reasoning.

Hick argues that the world we live in is “religiously ambiguous”. (1974, p 187) The existence of a religious reality is not a palpable fact about the furniture of the world. But this is not, given the normative characterization of faith, another regrettable fact which we are philosophically bound to accept. Rather, genuine, mature, responsible faith is possible because the religious reality affirmed by every religious world-view is not an eminent feature of the world. Religious commitment at it’s best must be a free and voluntary response to divine reality, and is not, and cannot be, a coerced response brought by the eminent reality of divine existence. As Hick says, “The true character of the universe does not force itself upon us, and we are left with an important element of freedom and responsibility in our response to it...I would suggest that this element of uncompelled interpretation...is to be identified with faith”. (1985, p 25) Thus, the thesis that both naturalistic and religious conceptions are different yet equally viable conceptual schemes that accord with the datum of experience is compatible with the religiously ambiguous nature of the world and the normative characterization of religious faith.

However, if both a religious and naturalistic understanding of the world are compatible with the datum of experience, it seems as if their cognitive content is identical. For there to exist a difference in cognitive content, there must be empirical consequences deducible from either the religious or non-religious conceptual scheme that differentiate themselves from each other. But if they are both empirically compatible with the realm of experience, not resulting in empirical differences that can be verified, then the schemes are not empirically different after all.

This is because of the empiricist principle which claims that cognitive, factual propositions or theories P and Q have the same empirical content, or are empirically equivalent, if empirical consequences deducible from P and Q are the same. As Hick formulates this principle, "Any state of the universe that satisfies the proposition in question must differ from any state of the universe that fails to satisfy it." (1983, p 109) But this principle, which Hick endorses, seems to refute the cognitive status of religious discourse, for the existential affirmation of a religious reality doesn't seem to result in either actual or possible verifiable data that cognitively differentiates itself from a world-view that doesn't affirm such a reality.

Worse still, and contrary to orthodox thinking, religious faith might amount to nothing more than a subjective stance one takes on the world, a way of interpreting the world that may assuage spiritual needs of humanity, but not a cognitive claim about the objective nature or structure of the world. The non-cognitive status of religious faith is reinforced by Hick's understanding of faith as an interpretive scheme that gives religious significance to phenomena, thus implying an understanding of faith that is devoid of both the cognitive and experiential dimension.

In fact, a non-cognitive characterization of faith is now in vogue in much academic philosophy. One standard argument that is often employed to justify this view of faith is founded upon an influential account of ethical language. Proponents of the "emotive theory of ethics" argue that standard ethical discourse like "Stealing is bad" or "Honesty is a virtue" does not give a factual characterization of human behavior which can be substantiated empirically. Rather, it has the emotive function of expressing the feelings users of ethical language have about human behavior. That is, ethical language registers and conveys the emotive attitude people have about the world and does not, given the logic of ethical discourse, give a factual description of the world. Likewise, religious discourse has the emotive function of conveying subjective religious feelings people have about

the world, but does not (and cannot) linguistically express factual assertions that can or cannot be empirically corroborated. Proponents of this account of ethical and religious language confine the cognitive status of human discourse to the natural and social sciences, thus rendering religious faith to the poetic and figurative expression of our subjective being. Religious faith, lacking factual content, need not worry about modifying or discarding religious doctrine in light of newly discovered factual knowledge. The implication, however, is that religious faith lacks the universal or cosmic application that stretches beyond the religious form of life. Religion would be invulnerable to external criticism but “as the price of such invulnerability, of significance only to those who choose to play this ‘game’” (1988, p 33)

But Hick strongly affirms the cognitive status of religious faith. The religious framework does not, for Hick, entertain particular empirical predictions of this world which cognitively differentiates itself from a non-religious framework. Though their interpretive schemes are different, both the believer and the non-believer can agree upon all the factual details of the world, and they do not entertain different expectations about the course of events which govern the world prior to the termination of conscious life. “They do not (or need not) entertain divergent expectations of the course of history viewed from within.” (1973, p 92) Yet, the religious world-view does, and naturalism doesn’t, affirm a post-mortem eschatological scenario where we are expected to continue our spiritual pilgrimage until reaching a final state of spiritual fulfillment. Life both prior to and after physical death is a “soul making” process, a process of spiritual training whereby we slowly but steadily climb up the salvific ladder until reaching that final state of salvation or liberation, thereby fulfilling the divine purpose the transcendent Real had in store for us. The final state of spiritual fulfillment, moreover, will eschatologically verify the reality of a divine reality by removing any rational grounds there might exist now for its non-existence. We will, after reaching this final

state, have an intense and lasting experience of the presence of this reality which will cast rational doubt on any form of religious skepticism. Soteriology is, therefore, employed by Hick to indicate the empirical difference between the two rival accounts of the universe, thereby vindicating his contention that religious faith is not simply a “gratuitous embellishment, a logical fifth wheel, an optional language-game which may assuage some psychological need of the speaker but which involves no claims of substance concerning the objective nature or structure of the universe.” (1985, p 110)

CONCLUSION

For Hick, the world religions give us a rather bleak picture of our spiritual condition. They all portray the “pervasive insecurity and liability-to-suffering of all life.” (1989, p 56) That notwithstanding, they jointly counterbalance their pessimistic portrayal by promising an ultimate state of spiritual fulfillment that compensates the travails of human life. The final blossoming of our spirituality requires the orientation of our lives to the transcendent Real. That is, Hick regards the spiritual precondition of salvation as amounting to the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.” (1989, p 36) For the world religions, “our life is a journey towards a final fulfillment...which gives value and purpose to the hard pilgrimage of samsaric existence.” (1989, p 61)

The Real is conceived and experienced differently by the different religious traditions. Each tradition expounds models and doctrines that purport to make cognitive sense of the ineffable and transcendent nature of the Real. Yet given the nature of the Real, we seem to lack epistemic justification for believing that these models somehow picture the nature of this reality. Hick argues that the sought for justification lies in soteriology. Insofar as the world religions, with their models and doctrines, provide the contexts for salvific transformation of their adherents,

we have the epistemic right for thinking that their doctrines are in alignment with the Real. Because the world religions provide equally valid contexts for salvation, the different models and doctrines give us complementary pictures of the unfathomable depth and richness of the Real.

Religious faith is an interpretive scheme which we employ to make religious sense of ourselves and the world we live in. The truth of religious faith can not be substantiated by appealing to the datum of experience, nor can it be ascertained by deductive a priori reasoning. In fact, the world we live in is religiously ambiguous, for it doesn't unambiguously favor or support a religious or naturalistic world-view. This raises a problem. If both world-views are equally viable interpretive schemes, being compatible with the way the world is structured, then their factual content is identical. But this sounds strange, for one posits the existence of a transcendent reality while the other denies its existence. Hick argues that their factual content prior to the termination of physical life is identical. However, the religious world-view does, and naturalism doesn't, affirm a post-mortem world where we will continue our spiritual project until reaching that final state of ultimate spiritual fulfillment. Hick again appeals to soteriology to solve an epistemological problem that results from his account of religious faith.

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