

Soteriology and the Philosophical Theology of John Hick (II)

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Introduction

Hick's grand and painstaking works on philosophical theology cover in hitherto unknown depths and clarity the themes that are typically present in any systematic treatment of human religiosity. Having said that, Hick's theology does resemble works in the same field, for after identifying a particular religious tenet as being singularly important, he refers to and makes use of it as a foundational principle that not only colors his way of handling the issue at hand, but guides the thread of the arguments he presents. It is the author's contention that soteriology is this very tenet that plays such an important role in Hick's theology. The purpose of this paper is to examine the exact role soteriology plays in Hick's exposition of three central theological themes (theodicy, realism, and religious belief) that appear in his works. But being germane to our subsequent discussion, a brief synopsis of Hick's theory of religious pluralism and soteriology will be given first.

1. Religious Pluralism and Soteriology

Hick coins the term 'Real' to refer to that ultimate, transcendent, and divine reality that manifests and reveals its presence in and through various different me-

diums (nature, history, people, etc) to humanity. The revelatory events have in turn evoked variegated responses from humanity. The world religions have established faith communities founded upon these events, elaborating significantly different doctrinal, mythic, and pictorial schemes that confer cognitive sense to the ways the Real impinged upon their religious sensibilities. Mainly in the Semitic tradition, we witness the cognizance of the Real as a personal being (Yahweh, Allah, Heavenly Father) who will eventually inaugurate and fulfill his divine purpose by establishing a personal partnership with a community of co-workers who through commitment and veneration will contribute to the workings of divine providence. In the Eastern tradition, we have a plethora of religious characterizations that construe the Real as non-personal (Brahman, Dharma, Tao), coupled with moral imperatives, meditative practices, and theological dogmas that will enable the adherents to liberate their lives from the travails and adversities that define the life of samsaric existence. The world religions responses to the revelatory events that the Real elicited were significantly different, for they were mediated, conceptualized, and expressed in terms of factors (language, metaphysical commitments, cultural and historical context, etc) that were at variance with each other. The mediation of revelation implies that the nature of the Real as it is in itself, independent of human conception and apperception is beyond our ken. It is an ineffable, trans-categorical reality that can not be schematized by our cognitive resources. Whatever religious understanding a given religious tradition professes to have is ultimately limited to the ways in which it was affected by the manifestations of the Real. "Thus the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purpose or non-purposive, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many." (1995, pg.27) The Real is the common transcendent source or ground underlining the varied human responses which constitute the different world religions we find ; they are all different yet valid cognitive responses to the Real.

Hick contends that in spite of their different human responses to the Real, the world religions all share an extremely critical estimate of humanity's spiritual plight, and jointly propose a way out of this predicament which will lead us into a limitlessly good state of spiritual well-being. Notwithstanding the terminological differences (dukha, avidya, 'fallen existence'), we are enmeshed in a spiritual malaise ; we are not spiritually and morally the way we ought to be ; the life we lead is governed and directed by the dark and ominous state of self-centredness. We aggravate the condition we are in by assuming and acting as if though we can somehow manage with our own strenuous efforts to liberate or save ourselves from this state without depending ultimately on a saving source that transcends our personal being. The world religions, however, each in their own way, propose a salvific life, a spiritual pilgrimage leading to salvation/liberation, which, if we enter, will absolve us from our plight. Though the specific form this salvific process takes will differ in each of the great religious traditions (self-committing faith in Christ, total submission to God which is islam, obedience to the Torah, meditative contemplation), they all imply the "transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness." (1989, pg.36) That is, genuine spiritual fulfillment is the result of opening up ourselves to the presence of the ultimate spiritual reality (the Real), and willingly orienting our lives to this reality by abdicating the life of self-centredness. This salvific process will eventually lead us to a state of ultimate spiritual fulfillment, a state that will be impervious to what characterizes our present spiritual existence. Though again the world religions have articulated this final state in extremely varied eschatological myths and images (kingdom of God, moka, nirvana), they all, by promising a limitlessly good spiritual state at the end of our spiritual odyssey, embrace a form of what Hick terms "cosmic optimism". (1999, pg.51)

It is an incontestable fact that each religion propounds the nature of our spiritual problem, the way out of this problem, and the state that is immune to this problem

in ways which are radically different. This difference in soteriology lends itself naturally to theological accounts of how to establish the soteriological efficacy of the different religious traditions. Exclusivists, after identifying a single tradition as the sole source of salvation, deny the possibility of genuine spiritual deliverance from our 'fallen condition' to those who do not belong to it. Inclusivists, on the other hand, single out a given tradition as being the most efficacious, yet grant other religious traditions the possibility of providing contexts for salvation insofar as their religious teachings and practices are consonant with the one deemed most efficacious. Hick questions the viability of both exclusivism and inclusivism. Hick argues that the only rational way to adjudicate the soteriological efficacy of the great world religions is by appealing to the moral and spiritual fruits, both past and present, of their adherents. If a given tradition excels in its behavioral output, then one can legitimately infer that it provides a comparatively better (or even the best) source for human salvation. But as Hick points out, the behavioral output of each religious tradition is a complex admixture of good and evil, and as far as we can tell, they all provide significantly different contexts for salvation whereby people are undergoing the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. Thus not only are the world religions, according to Hick's religious pluralism, based on equally valid cognitive responses to the Real, they also provide equally viable yet different contexts for human salvation. Hick writes, "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, pg.240)

2. Theodicy, Evil, and Soteriology

The prophetic religion affirms the existence of an omnipotent God who created the world *ex nihilo*; nothing existing in the created order is not under the surveillance of the sovereign and holy will of God; every item in the universe depends categorically for its very existence on God. Yet God is also believed to be the perfect embodiment of unconditional love (*agape*) for his creatures; divine *agape* is the complete and everlasting love for those who are not worthy of his love; it was out of his overflowing love for humanity that he sent his only beloved son to set the path for genuine reconciliation. However, reconciling the seemingly gratuitous pain and suffering in the world with the belief in an all loving and omnipotent personal God raises a serious problem for personal faith. The very existence of pain and suffering seems to imply that either God can eradicate evil but doesn't (which amounts to the denial of his unconditional love) or God doesn't because he can't (which obviously raises a question regarding his omnipotence). Contrary to orthodox teachings on God, it seems as if we can not affirm both the unconditional love and omnipotence of God. Is there a way out of this impasse?

Theodicy doesn't purport to give a complete rational answer to this theological quagmire. Evil will, as long as we are finite creatures, always be a mystery, and we cannot justify the ways of God in human terms without committing the grave error of putting ourselves on a par with God, or even elevating ourselves to God. Hick thinks that theodicy has the more minor, nonetheless extremely useful, role in preventing "the fact of evil (though largely incomprehensible though it remains) from constituting a final and insuperable bar to rational belief in God." (1973, pg.38) Evil in all its subtle ramifications need not become an irrefutable impediment to a life of faith in God. Nor should theodicy "attempt to regard evil as anything but dark, menacingly ugly, heart-rending, and crushing." (1973, pg.37)

The poignancy of the overwhelming and crushing travails in life should not be belittled as a fabricated illusion lacking in actuality.

Hick's theodicy is indebted to the systematic work of Irenaeus. Latent in this church father's work is, for Hick, a feasible Christian apologetics that can, when spelled out properly, meet the problem raised by wanton pain and suffering. Following Irenaeus, Hick subdivides the creative purpose of God into two grand schemes. Working in and through the natural order, God is seeking to create creatures who are made in the 'image' of himself; personal, autonomous creatures who are not only rational but equipped with the moral sense of what is good and bad. The world is the unfolding of a divine tapestry. In more scientific terms, this scheme implies the hands of God molding the course of the evolutionary process from the primordial source of the beginning of the universe to the natural conditions that enable the emergence of self-conscious creatures from our primeval ancestors. The second part of this creative process is the creation of creatures made in the 'likeness' of God. The divine disclosure of God's overwhelming purpose in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was a historical milestone for humanity. Being the apotheosis of man, the life Christ led set the norm that should be followed if we want to attain true spiritual fulfillment. It is only through the life of unconditional obedience to and trust in God's unmerited love and grace, and the concomitant life of unfailing service to and forgiveness of our neighbors, that we truly bloom our potentiality as spiritual beings made in the image of God. As Hick writes, "The divine likeness will be a quality of personal existence which reflects finitely the life of the Creator himself." (1985 b, pg.212) The divine purpose of the second creative act is that of bringing us out of an existence ensconced in personal gains and interests, culminating in "the eventual perfected human nature which God is seeking to form in us." (1983, pg.97)

The eventual perfection of our nature, however, is not brought by a divine whim, as if God could perfect our being by wielding his divine wand. Hick argues

that the completion of the divine purpose requires, firstly, the possibility for people to either accept or reject the divine calling to follow the footsteps of Christ by surrendering their will to God. This possibility means that God respects our status as autonomous agents who can, given certain restrictions, freely choose the life we want by appropriating values and beliefs that are compatible with our respective disposition. A personal relationship with God must be based upon our voluntary and free response to God's revelation ; we can not be mechanical automatons that are divinely programmed to lead a life of religious faith. Personal faith can not, without undermining our status as autonomous agents, be a relationship we are forced into accepting. "Only when we ourselves voluntarily recognize God, desiring to enter into relationship with him, can our knowledge of him be compatible with our freedom, and so with our existence as personal beings." (1974, pg.104) If a life of faith presupposes human autonomy, the very existence of God can not be an unequivocal fact about the world we live in ; his presence must be shrouded in a cloud of mystery, a presence that is concealed and not made eminent. God's indubitable existence will, by overriding our autonomous nature, only coerce a non-voluntary faith in him. Yet his existence can not at the same time be completely veiled. God's existence, if completely inscrutable by human standards, will fail to evoke a religious response. Thus, "the infinite nature of the Deity requires him to veil himself from us if we are to exist as autonomous persons in his presence." (1974, pg.133) In another work, Hick articulates the same insight when he argues that God does not "override the human mind by revealing himself in overwhelming majesty and power, but always approaches us in ways that leave room for an uncompelled response of human faith." (1970, pg.104) The first requirement, therefore, for the eventual perfection of our being is that we should be so constituted that we can freely respond to the love and grace of God in a religiously ambiguous universe.

The second requirement, and it is here that Hick elaborates his theistic re-

sponse to the problem of evil, is that the world as we find it, a world characterized by so much pain and suffering, is the kind of world we should expect to find ourselves in if we are to grow both spiritually and morally into the finite 'likeness' of God. It is by confronting and grappling with difficulties and obstacles that we mature as spiritual beings ; the world is a stage full of challenges that elicit traits (love, benevolence, courage, etc) which are deemed morally praiseworthy in the eyes of God. The precondition for moral improvement is the existence of evil in this world which in turn provokes the acquisition of moral and spiritual traits which we need so as to attain true spiritual maturity. Conversely, a "hedonistic paradise" (1985 b, pg.256), a world of total joy and bliss, a possible world of complete spiritual harmony lacking in every form of existential vice, "might well be the worst of all possible worlds." (1989, pg.119) For how can a world without vice elicit virtue? Moral terms ('altruism', 'love', 'sacrifice', 'courage', 'benevolence', etc) will be devoid of any meaning if there aren't any hurdles and obstacles that precipitate such moral behavior. Hick contends that only "a world that is imperfect, in the sense that it is no stress-free and pain-free paradise, can be an environment in which moral choices are called for and in which development of moral personality can take place." (1988, pg.55) Our world, therefore, is a "divinely appointed situation within which moral responsibility and personal growth are possible." (1983, pg.98) (As this passage attests, God is ultimately held accountable for creating a world containing all the vice and evil we find, thereby opposing the more orthodox line of Augustinian theodicy that identifies the root cause of evil as resulting from our misuse of free will.) Furthermore, the final attainment of spiritual fulfillment (either before physical death or after in a post-mortem world) will not only compensate the hardships we experience in life, but will also confer ultimate meaning and value to human suffering. Looking back, as it were, from the ultimate vantage point of our finite 'likeness' to the Deity, this "infinite future good will render worth while all the pain and travail and wickedness that has oc-

curred on the way to it.” (1985 b, pg.340) The divinely appointed hardship in life, therefore, is God’s way of sanctifying our nature as spiritual beings, bringing us out of our enclosed selves, and leading us into our ultimate sanctuary, traditionally conceived as God’s kingdom in heaven.

Hick’s doctrine of soteriology is his answer to the problem of evil. Given the theistic understanding of the Real as an omnipotent and loving being, evil can be seen as non-gratuitous, for it is by experiencing and overcoming problems that we slowly perfect our spiritual nature. The salvific process (ie : the gradual transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness) requires the existence of such problems in life, for our growth in spirituality does not follow a predetermined path which will inevitably lead us smoothly into the final salvific state. Human existence will forever be enmeshed in a state of meaninglessness if the existential problems of life lack the highly important instrumental value of perfecting our nature.

But because the Real is defined as an ineffable being, the viability of the theodicy Hick outlines is not strictly applicable to categorical frameworks that construe the Real differently. For a non-theistic construal of the Real might yield a different type of theodicy that may not be congruent with the idea of the Real shared by theistic religions. Hick’s theodicy is an attempt to meet the problem of evil within a theistic matrix ; the Irenaean theodicy is a metaphorical delineation of the compatibility of evil and the metaphorical understanding of God as personal being.

3. Realism, Non-realism, and Soteriology

From the ethical study of moral behavior to the metaphysical inquiry of the ultimate structure of being, the philosophical debate between realists and non-realists is one of many other nagging philosophical debates that keeps appearing

and reappearing in different guises and forms in different philosophical disciplines. A formal definition of realism, regardless of what these two rival views are arguing about, can be formulated. The three pillars of realism are as follows : (1) *Ontologically*, realism maintains that there is a reality external to human conception, and it exists independent of the cognitive or linguistic resources which we use to understand it ; this reality is not a subjective construct that we somehow manage to create ; it is a reality waiting to be discovered by the recourses and means made available to us. (2) *Epistemologically*, realism argues that this mind independent reality can be known as it is and not just as it appears to our cognitive or sensory faculties. The understanding we have of this reality reveals its intrinsic nature that doesn't reflect the ways in which it is cognitively understood by us. (3) *Semantically*, realism maintains that language can and does refer to this reality, and that it is not the case that language fails to linguistically denote the referent in question.

Non-realism, on the other hand, will question all three conditions. Non-realists, first of all, are inclined to be skeptical about the existence of a mind independent reality as such. The furniture of this world, ranging from the everyday macroscopic objects that surround us to the unobservable entities posited by scientific conjectures, is a mind dependent reality whose very existence is the product of our mental apparatus. Secondly, knowledge of the world and of ourselves is possible, despite the fact that it is mediated and conditioned by our cognitive machinery ; knowledge is confined to the ways we are cognitively affected by the world. Lastly, though non-realism doesn't deny the inherent ability of language to refer to the world, it denies its possibility to linguistically represent what is beyond the limits of thought and language.

Applying the above mentioned schemata to the context of philosophical theology, the religious realist (a) affirms the existence of an ultimate, transcendent religious reality (or the Real) that doesn't depend for its existence on human con-

ception (b) maintains that something can be known about what the Real is as it is in itself (c) and finally argues that putative religious assertions of the Real, because it exists, have a transcendent referent. Hick, however, is not a through and through realist. His own brand of realism (critical realism) affirms the existence of a “transcendent divine reality ; but is conscious that this reality is always thought of and experienced by us in ways which are shaped and colored by human concepts and images.” (1993 a, pg.7) Hick, therefore, accepts (a). Though the varied human responses to the Real we witness in the world religions are mediated and structured by a myriad of variables (language, the historical/cultural context the recipients of revelation are situated, the sensory apparatus we are equipped with, etc), they are not, for that reason, responses to a nonexistent being conjured up by the figment of our own imagination. Rather, the cognitive responses to the Real are responses to a mind independent reality that stands over and against us, and the cognitive rapport the different religions enjoy is made possible by the Real breaking in through human history, making its presence, through divine initiative, known by religions’ passive reception of its manifestation. But by being a transcendent reality, the Real is ultimately an ineffable reality that can not be conceptualized by the concepts and categories we use to confer cognitive sense to that which is within the domain of empirical discourse. The world religions (each replete with symbols, metaphors, and images of the Real) can only expound the ways their religious sensibilities were affected by divine revelation ; the world faiths can not conceive the nature of the Real as it is in itself by transcending the very unique and particular manner or mode of revelation they received. Hick, therefore, does not accept (b). As with regards (c), Hick does accept this criterion, for he does endorse the existential reality of the Real. Because its reality is affirmed, “the realm of religious experience and belief is not in toto human projection and illusion but constitutes a range of cognitive responses, varying from culture to culture, to the presence of a transcendent reality or realities.” (1989, pg.68)

In contrast to critical realism, there is non-realism. There are as many different types of non-realist theories of religion as there are non-realists. But notwithstanding the differences, they all share, in one form or other, a naturalistic ontology whereby there exists nothing other than the physical entities either corroborated or postulated by the methods of natural science. They jointly deny the ontological reality of any putative entity that can not in principle be verified by the canons of scientific thinking. That being said, the existence of an alleged transcendent reality (along with fairies and goblins) residing beyond the confines of the scientific web in a ghostly domain, is cast aside as nothing but a remnant from a mythic *Weltanschauung*. God (or any other concept that connotes a transcendent reality) is a human construct whose very nature is the product of a highly elaborate projection of qualities (love, power, intelligence, etc) drawn from within ourselves. God is man writ large. It is a reality created by us, and is not an objective reality discovered by humanity by making its presence known in and through the revelatory events codified in the various sacred literatures.

It is tempting, given religious non-realism's naturalistic conviction, to conflate it with atheism. However, non-realism doesn't deny the existence of God. It rejects what non-realists consider to be the highly questionable construal of God as a transcendent reality. God minus the transcendent dimension of this reality equals the God of non-realism. Various hermeneutical analyses of the concept 'God' has been proposed by non-realists. One influential account construes God as the sum total of everything that exists in the universe. God is conceived as a useful heuristic concept for collating the furniture of the universe into a coherent whole. Another account conceives God as an immanent creative force, albeit lacking in purpose, responsible for directing and leading the world through evolution to an unpredictable final state. Another form of religious non-realism which is gaining in popularity construes religious faith as a non-cognitive conceptual scheme (ie : a scheme that lacks factual content) which confers religious signifi-

cance to our lives and the world we live in. It amounts to nothing more than a way of looking at the world ; a non-factual, subjective way of envisioning the way things are in this world. Lacking in factual content, religious faith does not (and can not) assert anything that can be confirmed or falsified by factual evidence. Others not content with such theories that divorce God from ethics, construe God as a human made conglomeration of all our spiritual ideals which we deem important in life ; God is the reflection of the way we think we morally ought to be. In this way, God has the pragmatic value of orienting our lives in a moral manner, for it functions as a moral standard that judges the way we are and possibly strengthens our will to approximate to the epitome of true spirituality. Such non-realistic analyses of God (and there are many more) do illustrate the underlining motif of religious non-realism : A commitment to naturalism that bars any conception of God as a transcendent reality. Applying the three conditions of religious realism to non-realism, we can formulate the God of non-realism thus : God is a subjective human construct, whereby, being deprived of its transcendence, we can have no knowledge of and can not linguistically represent the transcendent dimension of this reality.

Without even entering into the intricacies of the religious realism/non-realism debate, non-realism as a philosophical doctrine faces some obvious insuperable difficulties. First of all, it does not, irrespective of its intention, give us a descriptive account of what people mean (and have meant) by the word 'God'. It is proposing a revisionist reading of this concept that does not pay due respect to tradition bequeathed to the contemporary setting. For no follower of any religion worthy of its name has ever sought to worship and devote his life to a figment of the human imagination. In a field of inquiry like theology, where tradition and orthodoxy are of paramount concern, every form of revisionism deviating from tradition must remain suspect until a viable rational for revisionism is given. Secondly, although God deprived of its transcendence may "make a wide appeal

within our contemporary industrialized, science-oriented, de-supernaturalised western societies” (1993 a, pg.3), the very fact that the God of non-realism is congenial to the secular mentality may signal the erosion of religion. To be sure, non-realists do not conceive religion as a spiritual aberration, a vestige from the past which must be discarded for its anachronism. No, they conceive religion as “the most valuable and ennobling aspect of our human existence.” (1993 a, pg.11) Yet, because the notion of transcendence (and other beliefs not compatible with the secular mentality) has debarred secular man from embracing what intrinsically is ennobling and valuable, non-realism has jettisoned from its formulation of religious beliefs what can potentially prevent people from entering the life of faith. But if this process of deletion continues, religion as such will be engulfed by the sea of change by acquiescing itself to the forever shifting trends of secular society. Making the central tenets of religion credible and understandable by translating and recasting ancient formulations of religious dogma to a more contemporary mode of understanding is one thing. Making the central tenets of religion credible by deleting tenets that don’t correspond to secularism is another story. Finally, non-realism’s tacit acceptance of naturalism as the most coherent metaphysical theory is questionable. Unlike what non-realists claim, the findings of science do not necessarily validate naturalism. Being a metaphysical theory, naturalism is one of many other possible interpretative schemes that purports to give the most plausible account of the findings of science. Naturalism is a meta-theory about science and is not a theory whose viability must logically and rigorously follow from the acceptance of scientific knowledge. Further, it is highly questionable whether naturalism can, as a metaphysical theory, give us an exhaustive account of the nature of the world. It has the tendency to pooh-pooh the metaphysical relevance of alleged phenomena (human consciousness, phenomenal experiences of qualia, religious experience, etc) that don’t accord with its view of the world. But this implies the highly tendentious nature of naturalism, for it doesn’t give much

metaphysical significance to what it cannot, given its metaphysical presuppositions and commitments, adequately explain.

In any case, there are philosophical problems with non-realism, and being a strong advocate of critical realism, one would naturally suppose that Hick raises criticisms against non-realism. But this he doesn't do, contending that "philosophical discussions cannot...settle the debate between religious realists and non-realists." (1993 a, pg.3) But he does stipulate a theological implication from the truth of non-realism and tries to show how this implication must, whether non-realists like it or not, be accepted by those who endorse a non-realistic analysis of religious belief. What then is the implication Hick draws?

The Real, which is the word Hick uses to refer to the ultimate, transcendent religious reality, is the common referent point for both the personal and non-personal models of divine reality we find across the different world faiths. Any given religious model of the Real (the Real as a heavenly father, for example) can not supply an exhaustive account of this transcendent reality, for its nature as it is in itself independent of human conception, is an ineffable reality that can not be confined by finite human categories. Regardless, however, of the divergent views of the Real we find across the different world faiths, they all affirm the universe as a "creation or expression of an ultimate overarching benign reality." (1993 a, pg.12) Further, because the Real is construed as a gracious and benign reality, the universe, which is the expression or creation of this reality, must be an environment which is somehow conducive to our spiritual project of liberating or saving ourselves from our spiritual predicament. That is, the structure of the universe is such that human salvation is not only a genuine possibility open to anyone who orients his life to the Real, but is a universe where the actual attainment of salvation (either in this life or in a post-mortem life) is ensured. If the Real is in fact a transcendent divine reality responsible for the creation of this world, "this present life constitutes a chapter in a story which is going eventually to have a happy

ending.” (1988, pg.14) On the other hand, if religious non-realism is right in eschewing the transcendent nature of divine reality by endorsing a robust naturalistic world-view, then the actual attainment of salvation can not be ensured. For it seems highly unlikely that a world containing nothing other than the concatenation of matter can be an environment which is conducive to human salvation. It also seems rather implausible to suppose that a humanly created divine reality lacking in transcendence can effectively save ourselves from our spiritual plight. There can not, if there is any iota of truth to what religions profess, a human solution to our spiritual problem ; ultimately we are the recipient of salvation brought by a source that is not reducible ontologically to how we are constituted. The soteriological implication of non-realism is not compatible with the eventual spiritual fulfillment of our being promised by all the major world religions. But the pessimistic implication does not necessarily mean that it is thereby philosophically unsound or false, for “a vision of the world could be both tragic and true.” (1988, pg.14) Thus, Hick, by stipulating the soteriological consequence of non-realism, is not raising an argument against this philosophical doctrine. Rather, Hick draws attention to a soteriological fact that must be accepted by non-realists. One can even say that Hick appeals to soteriology as a way of contrasting realism and non-realism by showing what does and doesn’t soteriologically follow from them respectively.

3. Religious Beliefs and Soteriology

It goes without saying that we are surrounded by perils that can, at any given possible moment, jeopardize or seriously impoverish our very existence as personal beings. We are all embedded in a physical environment where natural catastrophes of every conceivable kind can ruthlessly exterminate countless people, including ourselves. We also, as biological creatures, seem to lead a precarious

existence where our physical condition is forever menaced by every form of sickness or disease. As the biological clock keeps ticking away, there is also the inevitability of physical death which casts a dark shadow on our life. But we also confront existential problems that are responsible for the sense of angst and meaninglessness we sometimes experience, problems that disrupt our otherwise serene life. To make matters worse, we grapple with such spiritual problems, thinking that we can devise solutions to them, only to realize later that they keep reappearing and demanding, as it were, for a more plausible solution.

If we were creatures unaware of problems intimated by our precarious existence as finite beings, we would, to a large extent, lead a life untainted by every imaginable worry and grief. But this is not the case, and we constantly seek to fill the existential void we sense when encountering a world that is seemingly silent to our sometimes desperate queries about what it all means. Religious faith does, for many, fill this very void by giving meaning and purpose to life. It does so by giving us answers to the fundamental questions we want answered, questions that range from the quality of life we should lead as moral beings, the ways in which the Deity should be venerated to more speculative themes like the origin of the world as we know it and the fate that awaits us after physical death. Though the answers given to such questions are at times significantly different, the world religions have all expounded what they consider to be legitimate answers, sometimes sanctifying them into irrefutable religious dogma that must be accepted through faith and obedience.

It is an undeniable fact that the world religions embrace answers to varied questions (origin of the universe, the nature of life after death, etc) that are at variance with each other. Hick divides such conflicting truth-claims to two different categories. First, there are answers to “questions which there are presumably true answers, but to which we do not in fact know the answers.” (1993 a, pg.106) Hick calls them ‘unanswered questions’. The answers to such questions can, in princi-

ple at least, be attained by “historical or other empirical evidence.” (1989, pg.365). That is, though the validity of the answers accepted by the world religions can not at present be empirically established beyond reasonable doubt, they are answers, nonetheless, to questions which await some form of empirical corroboration. On the other hand, there are answers to questions that can not, even in principle, be corroborated by finite human intelligence. They are called ‘unanswerable questions’. The answers refer to questions about “realities transcending the systems of categories available in our human thought and language.” (1993 a, pg.108) Examples might help clarify the difference between the two categories, and show how the world religions reveal conflicting truth-claims regarding both these two kinds of questions.

The first example of an ‘unanswered question’ is whether the universe is eternal or not. The problem concerning the ultimate origin of the universe has certainly baffled humanity since its arrival on the cosmic scene, and has evoked, ever since the dawn of human curiosity, a myriad of speculations about this very problem. The conjectures, though varied, are reducible to two distinct types. First, the universe, not being eternal, has an origin in an initial state in the past; the universe as we know it does not regress indefinitely into the past but terminates at a given cosmic state. This view has won the adherence of the monotheistic faiths, for nothing is eternal other than the religious reality they venerate, and to conceive anything other than this reality as eternal is simply idolatrous. Second, we have the cosmic vision, shared predominately by the Eastern religious tradition, that conceives the universe as eternal, a universe which is constantly produced and destroyed in an endless process that has no beginning or end. The vanguard of scientific cosmology, though still in the speculative stage awaiting forthcoming verifiable evidence, has, in recent years, favored the positing of an initial cosmic state of immense density and energy responsible for the physical creation of the universe, suggesting the termination of the physical cause and effect chain at a single

physical state in the very distant past. This seems to lend support to the view that the universe is finite. However that may be, the point is that future work on cosmology can, in principle, determine whether or not the universe is eternal.

The second example of an 'unanswered question' regards the possibility of human reincarnation. The possibility of each individual being leading multiple lives has appealed widely to people of different religious and metaphysical commitments. It does, for many, offer a viable account of the otherwise inexplicable inequality in life. For according to one standard interpretation of this subtle doctrine, the state that we find ourselves in at present is determined by the state of karma we were in when we ceased to be in our previous mortal life. In other words, the state of karma we inherit from the previous life determines the circumstances of our next life. Our foothold in life is not a randomly appointed fate which must be endured. We have no one but ourselves to blame or praise for the status we find ourselves in. This Eastern religious doctrine has found very little countenance in Western religious thought. We find no reference to this doctrine in the standardized liturgies, canons, and creeds shared by the religions of the West, not to mention, of course, the official teachings permitted by scripture or the magisterium of the church. We witness again a putative conflict in what the world religions maintain regarding an important metaphysical doctrine. We can not, without erring on the side of being dogmatic, discredit the possibility a priori for future research in parapsychology or psychic phenomena to shed some light on the question concerning reincarnation. It is conceivable, bearing in mind the spectacular progress the natural sciences have made in recent years, that a tentative and provisional agreement can be reached based on whatever relevant knowledge science may in the future reveal.

There are, besides the examples we have examined, other issues concerning which the world religions maintain conflicting views. Whatever the actual issue at hand, they are all categorized as 'unanswered questions' in so far as they can, in

principle, be verified in terms of actual or possible empirical evidence. On the other hand, the world religions assert conflicting truth-claims regarding matters that are “beyond human comprehension and expression.” (1993 a, pg.108) The so-called ‘unanswerable questions’ are not susceptible to empirical corroboration, for we lack the cognitive resources that enable us to solve them. Two such questions (and there are many others) will be examined below.

The world religions jointly assert the existence of a transcendent divine reality that reveals its presence through different mediums to humanity. The revelatory experiences, in turn, have evoked responses from the different faith communities, where the religious significance of these events were interpreted and clarified in terms of relevant concepts and categories. The world religions have also endeavored to articulate in human terms the exact nature of this transcendent reality. Within the Semitic tradition, this reality is conceived as a personal being, an eternal and holy Thou, a numinous and sacred reality with whom one can relate to on a personal I-Thou relationship. A religious reality that is less than personal is not congruent with the Semitic mentality. In the Eastern tradition, the divine reality is conceived as non-personal, deprived of all the qualities and attributes that define a personal being as such. Theism of every possible kind is held in suspicion. A divine reality worthy of religious veneration can not be an anthropomorphic being created by the projection of values and qualities which we deem important. We have here a conflict in truth-claims concerning the ultimate nature of divine reality. From a purely logical point of view, it seems that this reality must either be a personal or a non-personal being, but not both. Yet because this reality is by definition transcendent, its nature can not, without reducing it to a pure immanent existent, be fully articulated by our cognitive resources. The actual nature of this reality is forever a mystery, transcending the limits of human intelligence. It is, therefore, an ‘unanswerable question’ that can not be resolved by, to borrow an oft repeated phrase from Russell, the ‘noonday brightness of human genius’. Nor

can we expect revelatory experiences in the future to confirm a particular way of conceiving this divine reality. Divine reality is always a veiled reality. Revelation reveals the mystery of things divine, and does not impart a once and for all understanding of divinity that will close the cognitive gap that exists between humanity and religious reality.

The second example concerns the final eschatological state we will experience when we fulfill the divine purpose. In contrast to the sufferings, frustrations, and tragedies we experience in life, the world religions posit a final eschatological state which awaits those who, with the help of divine reality, liberate/save themselves from a life centered and ensconced in the ego by opening up themselves to the presence of a transcendent reality. The world religions understand the actual nature or quality of this eschatological state differently. In the Semitic tradition, we are expected to enjoy eternal communion with our creator in a heavenly community consisting of saved individuals. The eschatological imagery which we often find in this particular tradition underscores the social relationships we will have amongst other social beings in a social network created and sustained by a holy being. The Eastern tradition does not share this vision. It is inclined to envision the final eschatological state as a state where our personal identity will dissolve as we get engulfed by and become part of ultimate reality. Personal identity as such, our seeming ontological independence from ultimate reality, is an illusion created by our egocentricity. Again we witness a marked difference concerning an important doctrinal matter. The highly speculative nature of eschatological myths with the sheer number of them we find in each religious tradition should serve us as a warning against making exact dogmatic claims about what we should experience in the final eschatological state. The quality of this experience can not be foretold in intelligible terms prior to the actual experience itself. We are not cognitively equipped to predict with accuracy the qualitative experience we are expected to undergo. We have no choice but to suspend judgment and hope for the

final state that should compensate the travails we experience in life. Thus, here is another example of what Hick terms an ‘unanswerable question’.

We have seen that the world religions all adhere to what they consider to be acceptable or viable answers to questions that are ‘unanswerable’ and ‘unanswered’. Is it, however, soteriologically important or necessary to give intellectual assent to the doctrinal teachings of a religious tradition one belongs to if one wants to attain salvation/liberation? There is a very popular and orthodox understanding of soteriology that can be found within each of the major world religions (especially prominent in the Western religious tradition) that categorically affirms the soteriological relevance of affirming the doctrinal teachings it professes. According to this view, orienting oneself to divine reality by leading a selfless, sanctimonious, and devout life is not by itself conducive to salvation unless it is supplemented by a firm conviction of the truth and the genuine acceptance of the teachings propounded by the tradition one belongs to. A sanctimonious life without the intellectual assent to religious dogma does not result in salvation. Is this view plausible?

Hick argues that to assume the soteriological relevance of accepting the answers to both the ‘unanswerable’ and ‘unanswered’ questions is a “soteriologically counter-productive error.” (1989, pg.345) Not only is the acceptance of such answers an unimportant precondition for salvation, but to assume otherwise “will only hinder our advance toward liberation.” (1993 a, pg.106) Hick’s contention follows the following line of argument : (a) Each religious tradition, after giving a critical estimate of our spiritual condition, proposes a salvific path which, if followed, will lead to an ultimate state of spiritual fulfillment. The salvific process amounts to a quality of life where we are expected to abdicate our personal concerns and interests by orienting our life to divine reality with faith and trust and by serving our neighbors with love and compassion. (b) The only viable method, for Hick, of comparing and contrasting the salvific efficacy of the different relig-

ious traditions is to examine how they compare in the way of producing adherents, both past and present, that behaviorally manifest moral qualities (love, compassion, selflessness, etc) that should be manifested if they are in the right path to salvation or have indeed reached the final salvific state. If any given religious tradition, hypothetically speaking, has produced more adherents that manifest such moral and spiritual fruits, then, and only then, can we infer the salvific superiority of that particular tradition in comparison with others. But Hick argues that we can not, without being biased and partial in our observations and analyses of the immense historical complexity of each religious tradition, stipulate a single tradition as being more soteriologically efficacious. Thus, we can only conclude that each religious tradition, as far as we can tell, provides equally valid contexts for attaining salvation/liberation. (c) Each religious tradition, as we have seen, embraces different answers to questions which are 'unanswerable' or 'unanswered'. From doctrinal beliefs concerning the origin of the universe to the more speculative issues concerning the ultimate nature of divine reality and the qualitative experience that awaits us at the end of our spiritual odyssey, the world religions embrace radically different, if not conflicting, answers to such questions. But if the soteriological efficacy of each tradition is on a par, one can only conclude that accepting the answers to such questions is not an important precondition for attaining salvation. For if the difference in beliefs adopted does not result in a difference in moral and spiritual behavior, then the very adoption of beliefs itself is not conducive to salvation. If, on the other hand, the adoption of a certain set of dogmatic beliefs does make a positive behavioral difference, then it seems appropriate to make sense of this fact by attributing more significance to what such beliefs can soteriologically achieve. But in so far as this evidence is wanting, the onus, for Hick, is on anyone who wants to maintain the importance of beliefs for salvation to somehow establish this fact. Hick writes, "But since the salvific process has been going on through the centuries despite this unknown distribution of truth and falsity in our

cosmologies and eschatologies, it follows that it is not essential for salvation to adopt any one of them.” (1993 b, pg.146)

Yet the forgoing conclusion does not imply that it is soteriologically permissible for any given religious tradition to accept the truth of any religious belief regardless of whether it has historically been enshrined in the heart of tradition as irrefutable religious dogma. If the religious tradition embraces beliefs that somehow hinder (or have the strong inherent possibility to hinder) the path to salvation, and if this fact can be established beyond reasonable doubt, then it, unless wanting to impede the path to salvation, must somehow abdicate such beliefs or ascribe some new meaning to them. Religious dogma that does or can act as an impediment to the salvific process to salvation must be abandoned or modified. It is undoubtedly difficult (though not theoretically impossible) to stipulate actual beliefs which, if acted upon, would lead us soteriologically astray. Part of the reason for this difficulty is because religious dogmas are often stated in symbolic or metaphorical language, making it extremely difficult to draw out the concrete implications they might have on actual human conduct. Another possible reason is that the exegetical analysis of religious language can not theoretically exclude the subjective and partial interpretive schemata the analyzer imposes when interpreting the language. This means that we can not discount the possibility that the analyzer may interpret, without overt intention, religious language in ways that accord with his personal disposition or the various convictions he may have. Notwithstanding such difficulties (and there surely are others), we can refer to doctrinal beliefs embedded in the sacred literatures of the world religions which have religious overtones that may very well impede the salvific process unless analyzed with great care and caution. Taking the Bible as a case in point, we have the sometimes strong misogynistic overtones in the epistles of Paul ; the occasional portrayal of Yahweh as a bloodthirsty and wrathful deity who has little concern above and beyond the welfare of the elected community established under the covenant ; occa-

sional anti-Semitic references to the Jewish community in the epistles ; seemingly exclusivistic claims, especially in the fourth Gospel, that deny salvation to those who don't have faith in Christ. Suffice it to say that such beliefs, if accepted and acted upon, can only impede the pilgrimage to salvation. Hick's theology proposes a criterion in terms of soteriological efficacy that helps adjudicate beliefs that shouldn't be accepted.

But this still leaves the important question regarding what we should believe. Hick argues that if we shouldn't accept beliefs that can or do impede our road to salvation, then we should, conversely, accept beliefs that are conducive to the salvific process. If soteriologically counter-productive beliefs should be abandoned, then soteriologically productive beliefs should be accepted and put into effect. As Hick writes, "What, religiously, we need to know is soteriological rather than metaphysical." (1993 a, pg.108) More specifically, we should learn how to, in our everyday lives, serve our neighbors and learn how to entrust our lives to divine reality. What we find here is the double requirement of how we should behave ethically towards our neighbors and divine reality. Though the world religions have propounded ethical maxims and moral imperatives that may, at the superficial level, appear to be at variance with each other, underpinning such differences, Hick believes, is the joint valuation of selfless love and compassion as the only certifiable way of serving humanity along with the unconditional love of and trust in divine reality as the only appropriate response we can take to its presence. Notwithstanding the rather formal characterization of the life of faith we find here, we need to know, before knowing anything else, that this is the quality of life that should be led, after which beliefs conducive to this life can be accepted as soteriologically important. This last point does imply an element of ambiguity regarding what beliefs should be counted as soteriologically efficacious, for though there may exist, within a given tradition, a set of core beliefs believed to be efficacious by its followers, there still may exist, depending on the individual, differences

about what personally promotes the salvific way of life. Facing this problem, there should exist some individual leeway about what belief should be accepted. There should, for Hick, remain some room for personal preference and choice provided that the use of such freedom does not counter personal growth in the life of faith.

It is not difficult to see that Hick's theory of religious beliefs has a pragmatic streak that values beliefs in terms of what they can soteriologically achieve. Beliefs shouldn't be believed for beliefs sake. Beliefs are simply means for the salvific end. "Religious doctrines are not ends in themselves but are skillful means to aid us on our way to enlightenment." (1999, pg.219) Religious beliefs are not unlike other items that are often valued for their instrumental significance alone. Tools we use to help facilitate our lives do not have value outside the function or purpose they are supposed to fulfill, and their value is lost if they somehow fail to achieve the end they were designed to achieve. Analogously, religious beliefs have instrumental value provided that they further the life of salvific existence. If they fail in this regard, they are deprived of soteriological significance, which means to say that it has marginal significance.

Conclusion

Hick argues that the world religions, though deeply poignant and uncompromising in their denouncements of our spiritual state, commend a salvific path that will direct us to a state of ultimate spiritual fulfillment. The quality of life required is nothing other than the radical reorientation of personal being from self-centredness to that of selfless devotion to and love of divine reality. Further, Hick is convinced that the world religions all provide different yet equally valid contexts for earning salvation. His religious pluralism is not compatible with orthodox soteriological thinking that either excludes the very possibility of salvation to those who don't belong to the one and only saving tradition or to that line of

thinking that grants salvation to those who don't belong to the most saving tradition provided that they belong to a tradition whose religious tenets somehow approximate to that which is deemed most saving.

Reconciling both God's unconditional love and omnipotence with the seemingly gratuitous suffering we find in the world has always posed a serious obstacle for theism. Hick's theodicy, which is heavily indebted to Irenaeus, tries to meet this very problem. God's creative purpose is to create and mold creatures enmeshed in their self-centredness into the finite likeness of God's personal being. To become citizens worthy of his kingdom, we must follow the footsteps of Christ by acquiring moral traits that were manifested during his ministry on earth. The acquisition of such traits is not possible if the world has no pain and suffering. It is only by confronting and overcoming the travails in life that we spiritually mature. Spiritual growth will continue until we reach true spiritual fulfillment. Suffering in its multifarious forms is God's appointed precondition for entering the kingdom. Soteriology is Hick's answer to the problem of evil in relation to a theistic understanding of divine reality.

Religious non-realism is a metaphysical doctrine that maintains that God (or any other transcendent reality) is a human construct that does not exist independent of human conception. Though contrary to orthodox teaching, non-realism has, in recent years, gained in popularity, partly because it presupposes a naturalistic ontology that is consonant with our secular mentality. Hick endorses a form of religious realism which affirms the transcendent dimension of God's being. Hick, however, declines to raise arguments against non-realism, contending that philosophical arguments alone can not effectively settle the realism/non-realism debate. He does, however, articulate the difference between the two rival doctrines in soteriological terms. That is, he deduces the soteriological implication from the truth of both doctrines. Given its metaphysical commitment to naturalism, Hick believes that non-realism must admit that salvation is not a genuine possibility open

to humanity in general if it is right in eschewing the transcendent nature of God. This is a problem that religious realism doesn't face, for it isn't committed to a world-view that makes salvation a dim and distant possibility. The world, being a creation of a benign and gracious transcendent reality, is a stage where salvation is (either in our present or post-mortem life) ensured.

One perennial concern about religious beliefs is whether or not it is necessary for salvation to give intellectual assent to religious dogmas shared within a given religious tradition. Hick doesn't think so. The world religions offer conflicting truth-claims to both 'unanswered' and 'unanswerable' questions. Questions of the former type are in principle empirically verifiable whereas the latter, being beyond the limits of finite intelligence, can not. Hick argues that the answers to such questions are not necessary for salvation, for the world religions have provided, as far as we can tell, equally valid contexts for salvation notwithstanding their differences in what they accept as true to the two kinds of questions. But this doesn't imply that we can believe what we want to believe and abandon whatever belief that doesn't strike our fancy. There must exist a criterion that can help adjudicate beliefs that should from beliefs that shouldn't be accepted in any given religious tradition. Hick argues that beliefs that are soteriologically counter-productive should be abandoned while beliefs that promote the salvific life (beliefs that inform how we should relate to our neighbor and divine reality) should be accepted. Hick, therefore, constructs a soteriological criterion that can help differentiate beliefs that are and are not relevant to the life of faith.

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