

IS JOHN HICK'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM PHILOSOPHICALLY
TENABLE?

by

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(Under the Direction of WILLIAM L. POWER)

ABSTRACT

John Hick advocates the view that the world's major religions are equally true and equally salvific despite their conflicting truth claims and diverse practices and self-understandings. In support of his pluralistic view, Hick has developed a philosophical theory that seeks to justify and explain how the world's major religions are all authentic human responses to a transcendent reality that is beyond human thought and whose nature is indescribable by human language. Hick calls this transcendent reality the Real. Hick holds that the various concepts of God or ultimate reality embraced by each of the world's major religions are authentic manifestations of the ineffable Real. Their authenticity is vouchsafed by the roughly equal success that Hick claims the world's major religions have had in transforming human beings from a self-centered existence to an existence centered in the transcendent Real. Hick claims that such transformation is the essential and common function of the world's major religions. The truth of the religions is thus evidenced soteriologically and ethically; by the love and compassion evidenced by the saints or great souls of the major traditions, and to a lesser but relatively significant way by other members of a religious tradition. This study will scrutinize and critique

the fundamental components of Hick's theory and offer a judgment on the philosophical tenability of Hick's religious pluralism.

INDEX WORDS: John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, Religious Pluralism, Religious Diversity.

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DEDICATION

They say that if you love something, then you ought to let it go and see if it comes back. I have always loved the study of religion. In 1989 I enrolled in the M.A. program in the Religion Department at the University of Georgia. In the Spring of 1991, I completed all the coursework but I did not finish the degree requirements before starting law school in the Fall of 1991. In 1995, I moved abruptly and unexpectedly from the state of Georgia to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where I now live. Then, in 2006, after a decade of practicing law, something was drawing me back to the study of religion. Soon I began to feel that I needed to complete what I had left unfinished. To my good fortune, I found out that Dr. Power, who had been my major professor in the UGA Religion Department, was still teaching there. I called Dr. Power and told him I wanted to finish my degree. With the help of Dr. Power, Zinetta McDonald and Dr. Carolyn Medine, I was readmitted, and I have been able to complete my degree long distance and in my spare time. My love of religious studies had come back. And the result is this manuscript.

I want to dedicate this to the special people in my life. I dedicate this to my mother, Leo Mansour, who exposed me to religion at an early age and has always been there for me; to my daughter, Morgan Mansour, who is both my joy and the most wonderful daughter I could have asked for. To my friends, that diverse and eccentric cast of characters from Fayetteville, Arkansas whose insights and antics continually enrich my life, I dedicate this to you all as well.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a work that sets forth in detail, interprets, and critiques John Hick's philosophy of religious pluralism. Hick's "*An Interpretation of Religion*," first published in 1989, was, and remains, his most comprehensive and in-depth treatment of religious diversity. The religious pluralism that Hick advocates and systematically sets forth in the book advances the view that those religious traditions commonly referred to as the world's great religions are all authentic and equally salvific human responses to a transcendent reality. Hick refers to these traditions as post-axial, in contrast to the pre-axial or archaic religions. The essential function of post-axial religion, Hick contends, is to provide contexts for transformation from self-centered existence to Reality centered existence. The "R" in reality is capitalized because Hick uses the term "the Real" to mean that the ineffable transcendent reality beyond all the concepts of God or Ultimate Reality that the religious traditions use to describe the ultimate reality. The Real is, according to Hick, beyond all concepts and human description. Hick theorizes that the authentic character of the post-axial religions owes to their power to orient people appropriately to the Real, as evidenced by the exemplary lives of moral virtue and compassion embodied by the "saints" within those traditions. Hick finds that the post-axial religions have fared about equally when compared to one another with respect to their promotion of goodness, as well as their deviation from their ideals. These are the basic contours of Hick's philosophical theory of religious diversity, also known as the pluralistic hypothesis.

In the first chapter of this work, I discuss the background and influences in Hick's intellectual life as they relate to the development of his pluralism. In the second chapter, I discuss

Hick's views on religious experience and its epistemological significance for his pluralistic theory. In the third chapter, I present a detailed and in-depth portrayal of Hick's philosophical framework that highlights the ontological and soteriological aspects of his theory, as well as the relationship between the two. In the fourth chapter, I delve into topics of criticism. Various criticisms and authors are discussed, and I present my own philosophical evaluation and critique of Hick's theory. In the fifth and final chapter, I delineate a suggested direction for the philosophy of religious diversity in light of the shortcomings I find in Hick's work, as well as the contributions of other authors, most notably John Cobb and William James.

A note on terminology: I use various terms interchangeably throughout this manuscript out of stylistic considerations. The term "post-axial religions" is used interchangeably with the world's major religions; the great traditions; the great faiths, and similar terms. If one of these terms or something substantially similar is used, I am referring to what Hick calls the post-axial religions. Similar variation occurs regarding the Real. Terms of equivalent meaning include the Real *an sich*; the Real in itself; the noumenal Real and the ineffable Real. The only time that the term "Real" is used for something other than Hick's idea of ultimate reality is if I am referring to the Real in its human or phenomenal manifestations. In such instances, the context should clearly indicate that I am not referring to the Real as the ineffable ultimate reality. Another area where interchangeable terminology appears is when I am discussing human transformation and its attributes. Goodness, love, compassion, altruism, moral virtue, moral goodness and similar terms may often be used interchangeably as marks of the transformed human existence that Hick associates with soteriological success. Hopefully, the stylistic benefits that might come from my use of synonymous terms will outweigh the risks of confusion.

CHAPTER ONE

The Making of A Christian Pluralist

Since the publication of *An Interpretation of Religion* in 1989, John Hick has become arguably the most important philosophical and theological exponent of religious pluralism in Anglo-American scholarship. His influence is undeniable, perhaps more for the vigorous dissent that his views provoke than anything else. After all, the theory of religious pluralism that holds that all of the world's major religious traditions are equally salvific and are ultimately referring to the same transcendent reality is not something that began with Hick. As commerce and travel began to open up more and more among the peoples of the world in the last two centuries or so, scholars and lay people alike became more receptive to spiritual paths outside of their own. Thinkers such as Frithjof Schuon and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, had developed pluralistic theories of religion before Hick's pluralism rose to prominence. So although Hick is by no means the first intellectually respectable advocate of religious pluralism, what he has brought to the conversation is an intriguing and compelling combination of lucid writing, breadth of learning, and an unprecedented appropriation of Kantian epistemology as the philosophical back bone of his pluralistic hypothesis. Hick's work has proven provocative, and no scholarship on the subject that uses English language sources would be responsible if did not at least mention Hick's work.

Hick's view of the relationship between the world's major religions can begin to be understood against the backdrop of two sets of circumstances. The first is Hick's personal experience out of which his views arose. The second is the range of contemporary and alternative

theological and philosophical views within which pluralism competes. Naturally, there is overlap between these two sets of circumstances. Hick is a Christian by birth and practice. And the competing theologies of religions that help frame the debate are mostly attempts by Christian philosophers and theologians to come to terms with the wide range of religious diversity that exists in our world. Accordingly, the discussion that this chapter undertakes will move freely at times between Hicks' personal experience and the major philosophical and theological issues that situate his thought.

John Hick was born in Yorkshire, England in 1922 to a Christian family. He was baptized in the Church of England as a baby. Of his early years in the church, he writes that church services "were a matter of infinite boredom," adding that "the whole Christian 'thing' seemed to me utterly lifeless and uninteresting. But I was nevertheless conscious of being in some kind of long-term state of spiritual dissatisfaction and search" (*Dialogues* 115). By age 16, Hick had become fascinated with the writings of Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell. His developing view of the world had become what he would loosely describe as "broadly humanist" (*Dialogues* 115). However, something very profound was soon to happen. When Hick was a law student at age 18, he had a very moving religious experience. As we will see later, some of the key terminology he uses in conveying what was a deeply personal event bears a striking parallel to the abstract philosophical concepts that are central to his religious pluralism:

I underwent a powerful evangelical conversion under the impact of the New Testament figure of Jesus. For several days I was in a state of intense mental and emotional turmoil, during which I became increasingly aware of a higher truth and greater reality pressing upon me and claiming my recognition and response. At first this was highly unwelcome, a disturbing and challenging demand for nothing less than a revolution in personal identity. But then the disturbing claim became a liberating invitation. The reality that was pressing upon me was not only awesomely demanding but also irresistibly attractive, and I entered with great joy and excitement into the world of Christian faith (*Dialogues* 115).

In later stages of this manuscript, we will have occasion to revisit the foregoing description as we consider how Hick's personal experience might give shape to his ideas about transcendent reality and its relation to soteriology in the context of his pluralistic hypothesis.

Hick further describes how he came to adopt a traditional evangelical Christian theology after his conversion experience. Belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, original sin, the atonement, the virgin birth and the Jesus' bodily resurrection are some examples of the evangelical creed which Hick unquestioningly embraced. His plan became to enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of England. But before entering the ministry, Hick moved to Edinburgh to study philosophy, for which he had developed a strong interest, as his early interest in Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell may have already suggested. The year, however, was 1941, and with WWII underway, Hick was called for military service. On Christian grounds, Hick decided to take conscientious objector status. While Hick would later acknowledge that he felt that the war against the Nazi regime was as justified as any war could ever be, he felt at the time that the teachings of Jesus could not be reconciled with killing. Hick joined the Friends Ambulance Unit, a Quaker organization, providing humanitarian services in the war effort in hospitals in London, Edinburgh, Egypt, Italy and Greece. When the war ended, Hick returned to Edinburgh to finish the three years that remained in his philosophy studies (*Dialogues* 116).

As is not too uncommon, Hick's philosophical training was leading him to question the evangelical creed that he had previously espoused so fervently. His questioning did not bring about a break from traditional Christianity. However, it is fair to say that Hick did experience some reservations and dissatisfaction at what he perceived to be a theological climate of reticence to confront difficult issues. Hick remained fairly conservative in his Christian outlook,

although he became somewhat less publicly expressive of his faith, drifting away from the evangelical student movement in which we had been participating (*Dialogues* 117).

The following years brought more and higher level studies in philosophy, followed by publication of what would later become Hick's first major work "Faith and Knowledge." Those years also brought ordination into the ministry, marriage and the Hicks' first child. While serving in a rural congregation near the Scottish border, Hick received an invitation to from Cornell University to become an assistant professor of philosophy and teach philosophy of Religion. Hick accepted. As he began his stint at Cornell, Hick recounts that he had not yet made any notable departures from his conservative evangelical creed. Such a departure finally came, according to Hick, in 1961. While teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, Hick questioned whether a literal belief in the virgin birth as an historical event was fundamental to belief in the incarnation (*Dialogues* 118). To have raised such a question in what was at the time a fairly conservative theological milieu proved rather provocative if not scandalous in some ways for Hick's standing as an ordained minister. Thus, 1961 can be regarded as the year when Hick was baptized into the life of theological controversy with which he later came to be so very well identified, with his theory of religious pluralism serving as one of the most prominent examples.

The personal experiences that brought Hick closer to what would one day become a full-fledged adherence to religious pluralism were awaiting him in Birmingham, England. After his teaching positions at Princeton and later Cambridge, Hick moved to Birmingham to fill the H.G. Wood Chair of Theology. He would live in Birmingham for the next 15 years. Birmingham at that time was a magnet for immigration of peoples from the Caribbean Islands and the Indian subcontinent. Significant communities of adherents of non-Christian religions such as Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus were springing up, joining the already well-established, albeit small, Jewish

community that existed there (Hick, *Dialogues* 122). Hick became exposed to religious traditions that he had previously only heard something about but had never really encountered or even studied in any great depth. He developed friendships with people of diverse faiths as he served as the first chair of the activist AFFOR (All Faiths For One Race, as well as the chair of the Birmingham Inter-Faiths Council, just to name two examples of his practical and very active involvement in matters of religious and cultural diversity (*Dialogues* 122). During this period, Hick's personal experiences were leading him to an understanding of the relationship between the world's religions that was setting the stage for the mature theory of religious pluralism that he would later elaborate. Another direct quote from Hick is now appropriate:

In the course of this work, I went frequently to Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, Sikh Gurudwaras, Hindu temples, and, of course, a variety of churches. In these places of worship I soon realized something that is obvious enough once noticed, yet momentous in its implications. This is that although the language, concepts, liturgical actions and cultural ethos differ widely from one another, yet from a religious point of view basically the same thing is going on in all of them, namely, human beings coming together within the framework of an ancient and highly developed tradition to open their hearts to God, whom they believe makes a total claim on their lives . . . (*Dialogues* 122).

We find here another very revealing autobiographical comment. It indicates clearly one of the prominent streams of influence that would eventually give shape to Hick's theory of religious pluralism. We can, therefore, discern something about the personal context of Hick's thought concerning religious diversity. At least two important convictions are in play. The first is a deep commitment to the authenticity and reality of a conversion experience that was Christian in its particulars. The second is the conviction that the world's religions, including Christianity, share something fundamental and profoundly important in common. To reconcile these two basic convictions into a coherent intellectual scheme would eventually become part of Hick's project of constructing his theory of pluralism. Moreover, Hick's above-quoted observation about the

diversity of religious practices contains an allusion to another important theme in Hick's thought whose influence can be traced back to Hick's early fascination with Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell.

To those familiar with Hick's writings on religious pluralism, Hick's assertion in the above quoted passage that "*from a religious point of view* basically the same thing is going on" should be a reminder in Hick's thought the "religious point of view" is held in contrast with naturalism. These are the two most decisive options that Hick recognizes as available as human responses to the question of the meaning of existence at its deepest level is a religious interpretation of existence and a naturalistic interpretation of existence. Generally speaking, the religious interpretation of existence consists in "the faith that religious experience is not purely imaginative projection but is also, at the same time, in varying degrees a cognitive response to a transcendent reality"(Hick, *Dialogues* 82). By contrast, the naturalistic interpretation of existence would hold that the physical universe is all that is real and religious beliefs in divine realities that transcend the physical or observable universe are illusory. Naturalism, as the term implies, limits the scope of what can be claimed as true to what is within nature, understood as the physical, chemical and biological processes that are discernable through empirical means. Naturalism rejects religious belief in personal deities or in any ultimate ground of value beyond the scientifically verifiable realm. For the naturalist, any appeal to a transcendent reality to account for any aspect of experience is unjustified. Either the availability of non-religious accounts render the transcendent an unnecessary concept or the facts of existence, such as the reality of plenary pain and misery, are incompatible with the cosmic optimism that religious interpretations have.

Hick argues that whether naturalism is true or whether a religious interpretation of life is true is not a question that can be answered convincingly by either side. Opting for one interpretation as opposed to the other is not something Hick believes a person can do on the basis of a claim that one view is more rational than the other. Hick believes the universe has an inherent and inscrutable ambiguity regarding the question of whether there is a transcendent reality that corresponds to religious belief and practice. There is no single argument that either side can offer that compels a final conclusion. There are a number of arguments by which each side can make its points. But the points that either the naturalist or the religious person can marshal for and against either position cannot be evaluated by any sound criteria. To evaluate the cumulative arguments for or against naturalism or religious faith would involve designating values to the strength of the various arguments on both sides. And any such designation would be hopelessly arbitrary and subjective (Hick, *Interpretation* 123). Therefore, Hick concludes that the universe maintains its “inscrutable ambiguity,” permitting both a religious and naturalistic interpretation (*Interpretation* 124).

At this point, one might wonder whether Hick’s agnostic stance toward ultimate questions and his conviction that “basically the same thing is going on” among the world religions eventually lead him to discount or discard his Christian conversion experience he underwent as a teenager. Hick reports that such is not the case: “My conversion experience, with its powerful awareness of a divine presence that was both profoundly challenging and at the same time profoundly creative and life giving remains basic; but the particular fundamentalist package that came along with it has long since crumbled and disappeared” (*Interpretation* 118). Accordingly, the religious pluralism that Hick would develop would take its particular form under three distinct influences: the Birmingham experience of diversity that led Hick to believe

in a kind of equality shared by the world's religions; the early humanist influence of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Russell whose atheistic arguments Hick found too powerful to write off as inferior; and the Christian conversion experience which Hick found so compelling as to be worth salvaging in an albeit different intellectual package. Consequently, something Hick had to do in order to develop his pluralistic hypothesis was to weed out the unacceptable elements of his Christian creed that followed his conversion while retaining whatever was worth keeping. Hick opines that “[i]t can in many cases be good to undergo a ‘fundamentalist’ conversion so long as one later sorts out the intellectually acceptable and unacceptable and is able eventually to discard the latter” (*Interpretation* 118).

Among those aspects of the fundamentalist theology that Hick finds unacceptable and which conflicts directly with religious pluralism is the general view known as exclusivism. In its most extreme form, the exclusivist view, as the term suggests, holds a particular religious faith as superior to all others, and excludes from the category of salvation all those persons who are not within that faith and it excludes from the category of religious truth any religious belief which is not within the same faith's belief system. Although commonly associated with conservative or fundamentalist Christianity, an exclusivist position can be, and has been, adopted within various world religions. In any event, it is the Christian form of exclusivism that has preoccupied Hick the most. While it might not be clear whether Hick had ever adopted a fully exclusivist stance in his early years, it is certain that Hick viewed Christianity as superior to other religious traditions. Hick believed that God willed that all humanity should become Christian, and he recalls feeling shocked when Reinhold Niebuhr declared that missionary activity directed at Jews was a mistake (*Interpretation* 121).

In any event, Hick eventually came to view Christian exclusivism as reprehensible insofar as it limits salvation to Christians, which is a view Hick calls salvation-exclusivism, as distinguished from exclusivism with respect to truth claims. Of salvation-exclusivism Hick writes:

The only salvation-exclusivists that are left are the few Catholic ultra-conservative followers of the late Archbishop Lefebvre, who was excommunicated in 1988, and a much more numerous, vociferous and influential body of Protestant fundamentalists. Their position is a consistent and coherent one for those who can believe that God condemns the majority of the human race, who have never encountered or who have not accepted the Christian gospel, to eternal damnation. Personally, I would view such a God as the Devil! (*Christian Theology* 19).

In addition to expressing such emphatic opprobrium, Hick faults salvation-exclusivism for being at odds with basic observations about human beings and for an overly eschatological underlying concept of salvation. Hick believes salvation should not be regarded as a state of ultimate human destiny, but as “an actual salvific change in women and men.” Broadly speaking, for Hick such a “salvific change” involves an observable improvement in peoples’ lives with regard to love of fellow human beings and inward attainment of joy and peace. Hick believes salvific change is observed to occur within all the post-axial religions. The term “post-axial religion” for Hick means those religions which are “centrally (but not solely) concerned with the quest for salvation or liberation,” in contrast to pre-axial religions which concern themselves more fundamentally with preservation of cosmic and social order than with anything else (Hick, *Interpretation* 22). Examples of post-axial religion would include, but would not necessarily be limited to, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism and B’ahi. Because Hick finds no observable superiority in the capacity of one post-axial religion over another to promote salvific change, Hick believes salvific exclusivism is not a tenable position. We will return to Hick’s soteriological views in later chapters as we consider his religious pluralism in more detail.

Continuing with our broad outline of the experiences and views that form the context in which Hick's pluralism takes root and is shaped, we should note some of Hick's general notions about exclusivism as to truth claims. Hick is well aware of the logical problems created by the contrasting and conflicting beliefs among the post-axial religions. While Christians would hold that the ultimate source of the universe is the Holy Trinity, Islam teaches that the ultimate source is strictly unitary. Again, Hinduism contains traditions that speak of ultimate reality as the impersonal universal consciousness of Brahman, while Taoism teaches of the eternal Tao as the ultimate reality beyond all human expression. Hick reasons that if one of these conceptions of ultimate reality is true in the sense of reflecting reality, then it follows that all the others must be false to the extent they differ from it (*Christian Theology* 24). However, such a conclusion, is not one that Hick will accept. Consequently, the logic of the exclusivism of the Christianity of Hick's early life, with its implication that falsity characterizes the religious beliefs of all religions but one, challenged Hick to formulate a theory more amenable to his pluralistic sensibilities. This theory will, of course, be explored as we move into subsequent chapters.

Religious exclusivism is not worthy of acceptance for Hick in any form. But what does Hick have to say about a view that does not exclude non-believers from salvation but instead includes the non-believers within the fold secured for them by the merits of the one true faith? This view, as it is here broadly conceived, is known as religious inclusivism. And like exclusivism, which can be present in one form or another within post-axial religions outside of Christianity, inclusivism has challenged Hick principally in its Christian variety. Christian inclusivism generally regards non-Christian faiths as worthy of respect for their wisdom and ideals, but lacking in and of themselves the power to bring people to salvation. Nevertheless, the members of non-Christian religious traditions are not consigned to perdition. The saving work of

Christ may be imputed to them and they may have the opportunity, in this life or in the hereafter, to receive the grace needed for salvation even though they may be unaware that it is through Christ that saving grace is given to them. Whether Christian inclusivism insists that accepting Christ is necessary but can happen in the afterlife or that salvation can begin to occur in the present life without knowledge of Christ, the difference between inclusivism and exclusivism should be clear. Inclusivism does not foreclose heaven to non-Christians by virtue of their religious beliefs whereas exclusivism does.

Hick's basic objection to Christian inclusivism is that it "is a vague conception, which when pressed to become clear, moves toward pluralism" (*Christian Theology* 23). If Christian inclusivism means the opportunity for non-Christians to accept Christ in the life to come, Hick finds such a view to be teetering. By trying to instill a sense of divine mercy into the salvific plan for non-Christians, such a form of inclusivism paradoxically undermines one aspect of traditional doctrine to maintain another. Specifically, by insisting on the traditional belief that one needs to accept Christ in order to be saved but making allowance for non-believers in the afterlife, this form of inclusivism dispenses with the traditional Christian insistence that the opportunity for salvation presents itself only in the present life. Essentially, such a move places traditional Christian teaching on a slippery slope. Once Christian theology removes one element of traditional teaching on salvation to accommodate greater openness to salvation for non-Christians, there is nothing in principle to prevent further removals in the direction of more and more openness until pluralism is eventually realized.

If, on the other hand, Christian inclusivism means that Christ saves non-Christians during life on earth, Hick's response would be that a view is even more leading toward pluralism than the first form of inclusivism we considered. Hick argues that to say that Christ saves non-

Christians on earth surely entails Christ's saving work with respect to devotees of faiths that historically preceded Christianity, such as Hindus and Jews. But if that is the case, the atoning work of Jesus of Nazareth would have to somehow retroactively apply. Backward causation, Hick avers, is not a concept an inclusivist who is trying to observe canons of rationality would want to indulge. Consequently, the inclusivist must resort to a more transcendent or cosmic idea of Christ, as that of the Logos, traditionally regarded as the second person of the Trinity who incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. The problem with this idea is that salvation no longer has its locus in history. The traditional Christian belief in the saving power of the interrelated incarnation, atoning death and resurrection, all situated in history as Christ event, is supplanted by a trans-historical appeal to an eternal divinity that was saving people before Jesus of Nazareth was even born. Hick writes:

[T]o make sense of the idea that the great world religions are all inspired and made salvific by the same transcendent influence we have to go beyond the historical figure of Jesus to a universal source of salvific transformation. Christians may call this the cosmic Christ or the eternal Logos; Hindus and Buddhists may call it the Dharma; Muslims may call it Allah; Taoists may call it the Tao; and so on. But what we then have is no longer (to put it paradoxically) an exclusively Christian inclusivism, but a plurality of mutually inclusive inclusivisms which is close to the kind of pluralism that I want to recommend (*Christian Theology* 23).

What becomes apparent is that Hick wants to dethrone the claims of Christian superiority and establish a more egalitarian outlook. Exclusivism and inclusivism are not viable options. Exclusivism is theologically tyrannical in Hick's outlook because it assumes the exclusive right to dictate the formula of salvation. Inclusivism, although it does not monopolize saving truth to the exclusion of people of vastly different religious affiliations, still assumes an unwarranted superiority by not granting autonomous status to non-Christian faiths as independent paths of salvation. Pluralism is the only option Hick deems worthy to try and develop.

This chapter has sought to place Hick in context before moving on to the more technical aspects of his philosophical theory of religious pluralism. The pluralism that Hick wants to recommend has as its background a number of identifiable influences. There is the influence of an early conversion experience that placed Hick within the fundamentalist Christian fold. There is the camaraderie and common undertakings in Birmingham that Hick enjoyed with devotees of various faith traditions along with the exposure to their religious traditions. There is the intellectual force of naturalism that persuaded Hick to admit rather agnostically to an inherent ambiguity in the universe. There are the challenges posed by the idea of Christian superiority, whether that idea take an exclusivist or inclusivist form. As both a Christian minister and an academic philosopher of religions, Hick's task became reconciling his religious experience and faith convictions with his ideas of the equality of the world's religions and the ambiguity of the universe. Faith and reason intersected with a strong resonance in Hick's life and his intellectual disposition required that he make sense of it all. This, among other things, is what Hick's pluralistic hypothesis aims to achieve. Among the most essential aspects of the groundwork for the construction of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis are his treatment of religious experience and its epistemic relationship to faith and belief. It is to these subjects that we will now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

Religious Experience and the Rationality of Belief

In the previous chapter, one of the things I highlighted was Hick's view that the universe has a kind of insurmountable ambiguity to it. Whether or not there actually exists a divine or transcendent ground of being and value is a question too problematic for rational argument to overcome by means of some sort of conclusive proof. Since Hick believes no definitive answer to the question of supernatural existence can be established, it is easy for someone unfamiliar with Hick's writings to expect him to opt for a thoroughgoing agnosticism. However, as we have seen, Hick remains committed to the compelling quality of his own religious experience, and he espouses the view that religious faith is not an illusion or a projection but is a cognitive response to a transcendent reality.

To sustain his realist perspective, Hick draws heavily, if not entirely, on his understanding of religious experience: "Thus, if in the existing situation of ambiguity a person experiences life religiously, or participates in a community whose life is based upon this mode of experience, he or she is rationally entitled to trust that experience and to proceed to believe and to live on the basis of it" (*Interpretation* 228). The view expressed in this quote has important implications for the epistemological aspect of Hick's theory of religious pluralism. The following considerations show why this is so: First, since Hick is a proponent of religious pluralism, he finds ultimate commonality among post-axial religious traditions despite the apparent divergences of beliefs and practices. Second, experiencing life religiously rather than naturalistically is something Hick would say the post-axial faiths have in common. Third, Hick

thinks religious experience is where belief in and response to a transcendent reality must find its rational ground. Thus, the foregoing premises considered, it follows that a religious pluralism that sees the post-axial faiths as essentially of equal epistemic value would have to hold that the post axial religions are of equal experiential value. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to analyze Hick's understanding of religious experience as the key element of the epistemology upon which his religious pluralism is predicated.

Given the epistemic importance of religious experience in Hick's religious pluralism, it becomes critical for an understanding of Hick's religious pluralism for us to look into what Hick has in mind when he speaks of experiencing life religiously. For Hick, the meaning of religious experience inheres certain fundamental ideas and concepts that serve as basic features. This chapter will identify and describe those features. In the course of such descriptions, I hope to illuminate Hick's understanding of religious experience by showing the connections between or among those same features that are so basic to Hick's view. Those features that this chapter will identify and describe include the following: "consciousness", "meaning", "concepts", "experiencing-as", "cognitive freedom", and "faith". In Hick's view, these terms are operative in all of the post-axial religions and perhaps the entire religious experience of humankind. In starting a discussion about how Hick conceives of religious experience, it is helpful to consider what he understands about what it means for people to have experience generally. Hick defines experience simply as "a modification of the content of consciousness" (*Interpretation* 153).¹ So let us ask what Hick means by consciousness, how the content of consciousness is modified, and in what sense such a modification of the content of consciousness is religious.

Consciousness is an idea that Hick regards as characterized fundamentally by the concept of meaning. Consciousness involves a discriminating awareness of the various features of one's

surrounding. Such discriminating capacity enables humans to respond either appropriately or inappropriately to the situations that confront them:

We can accordingly define meaning as the perceived (or misperceived) character of an object or situation such that to perceive it as having that character is to be in a distinctive dispositional state in relation to it. . . . All consciousness, or at any rate all our normal consciousness, is consciousness of an environment which we perceive as having many kinds and levels of meaning, an environment such that we can act and react in response to its character as this varies through space and changes through time (*Interpretation* 130-131).

Human consciousness is thus always a relational awareness. According to Hick, human beings are not “within a homogeneous continuum within which no distinctions can be made, or within a mere chaos or stream of kaleidoscopic change which would offer no purchase for purposefully appropriate action, but rather . . . we experience things and situations as having this or that recognizable character such that it is appropriate for us to behave in relation to them in this rather than in that way”(*Interpretation* 130-131). Thus, Hick views the content of consciousness as a stream of recognitions. Consciousness occurs within a relatively structured environment that prompts subjective, practical dispositions toward the features of that environment. The practical dispositions that arise in human beings from their continuous encounters with all they meet in their environment are what constitute the various meanings that humans find therein.

Having discussed the content of consciousness as basic element in Hick’s concept of human experience, we can now consider what Hick means by experience as the *modification* of the content of consciousness. Modification implies change. Hick believes there are two basic kinds of changes to the contents of consciousness. One he calls intentional. The other he calls non-intentional. The difference between these two types has to do mainly with whether or not a person’s consciousness at a given time is predominated by a sense of something external. For example, consciousness of a tree would be consciousness of something external rather than

something internal. A contrasting example would be consciousness of an inexplicable sense of joy or anxiety, which does not involve something external to or outside the person whose consciousness contains the sense of joy or elation. Intentional modifications of consciousness correspond to the sense of something external as in the example of the tree. Non-intentional modifications of consciousness are illustrated by the example of inexplicable joy or elation (Hick, *Interpretation* 153). It is to the first example, intentional experience, that Hick devotes considerable attention in emphasizing the interpretive element of human experience, which should be understood in terms of the notion of “experiencing-as.”

According to Hick, all intentional experience is “experiencing-as,” which Hick identifies as the outcome in consciousness of the active interpretation of the environment by the mind/brain by means of concepts and patterns drawn from its memory (*Interpretation* 140). Despite the emphasis Hick gives to experiencing-as in connection with intentional experience, Hick does not so limit experiencing-as to intentional experience, as he asserts “all conscious experiencing is experiencing-as” (*Interpretation* 140). In this vein, the role of concepts figures importantly. Hick’s conviction is that “all experience embodies concept-laden forms of interpretation.” Hick defines concepts as recognitional capacities which have been focused, abstracted and fixed by language” (*Interpretation* 142). Further, Hick characterizes concepts as “social products having their life within a particular linguistic environment” (*Interpretation* 141) To understand more about what Hick means by concepts, we can look at the contrast Hick makes between concepts and what he calls the “pre-linguistic recognitional capacities” of non-human animals. Hick describes non-human animal experience as having the power of recognition but lacking in conceptual capacity. The non-human animals are able to discriminate among the objects of their physical environment and respond to the pressures that the environment imposes upon them.

Encoded instincts of very limited range are what enable the non-human animals to make their responses to the various stimuli in their environment. Human beings, on the other hand, respond to their environment through complex conceptual frameworks made rich and more diverse by the more complex mind/brain that humans possess. It is this complexity that accounts for experiencing-as. Non-human animals do not experience-as. To experience-as entails the possibility of multiple meanings from among which recognition discerns one meaning rather than another to frame a response to whatever feature of the environment is prompting a particular response. The vast complex of meanings made possible by the linguistic and conceptual capacities of human beings make it possible for them to experience something *as* an instance of one particular meaning rather than another conceivable one.

Hick illustrates by using the ordinary example of a dinner fork. What does it mean to say that my experience of a dinner fork is an experience-as? If I see a dinner fork, I recognize it as an instrument for eating. Someone from a primitive culture that does not use forks might recognize it as a weapon, or a digging instrument. I experience it as an instrument for eating by means of a concept provided by my society. The individual from the primitive society who sees the dinner fork as something other than a tool for eating is not informed by the habits and customs of a culture that makes such an instrument for the purpose of eating food. Therefore, the primitive person will employ a different concept to interpret the fork. As Hick argues, the object we call a fork “does not bear its’ meaning stamped upon it” (*Interpretation* 141). The meaning of the fork is derived from the recognition or identification of that object as this kind of thing, rather than another kind of thing, by virtue of the particular concept that filters the object we call a fork into our awareness.

We should now have an idea of what human experience means for Hick as a modification of the content of consciousness. The contents of consciousness are concepts and patterns of memory that mold meaning from the raw data that flows into consciousness from the external environment. Consciousness is modified by means of the interpretive, concept-laden responses to the raw data by which each datum is experienced as one meaning rather than another. These interpretive responses build up within consciousness so that each interpretive response alters the contents of consciousness that were previously present. With this understanding of general or natural experience now in place, the question becomes what, if anything, makes an experience a religious experience?

Hick distinguishes between two general types of religious experience. The first type is religious experience where a sense of the presence of the transcendent is mediated by material objects. Praying with rosary beads, reading from a sacred scripture, and participation in ritual are a few examples of this first kind of religious experience (*Interpretation* 154). The second type of religious experience is more direct. It is known as mystical experience. Hick distinguishes this kind of religious experience from religious experience that is mediated and indirect in that the impact of mystical experience “instead of being mediated through the outer world of nature and history, is directly prehended at some deep level of the mystic’s psyche and then expressed in forms supplied by his or her mind” (*Interpretation* 166). But he also contends that mystical experience shares “a common epistemological character” with mediated religious experience in that it is a “joint product of the impact of a transcendent reality and of the mystic’s own mind set” (*Interpretation* 165). Indeed, this is so for even the most intensely unitive of mystical experiences, whereby the mystic reports the sense of total absorption in or unsurpassable union with the transcendent: “[E]ven in the profoundest unitive mysticism the mind operates with

culturally specific concepts” (*Interpretation* 295). It is for these reasons that Hick states: “We describe religious experiences as those in the formation of which distinctively religious concepts are employed” (*Interpretation* 153).

In addition to the use of distinctly religious concepts that convey the sense of the transcendent, there is an equally important and maybe more fundamental element that gives religious experience its character in contradistinction to ordinary experience. That element is religious faith. Hick defines religious faith as “that uncompelled subjective contribution to religious experience which is responsible for its distinctively religious character” (*Interpretation* 160). For Hick, religious faith occurs at the deepest of levels as a choice to interpret life religiously rather than naturalistically. As Hick reminds us, the universe we live in is intrinsically ambiguous with respect to the availability of an answer to the question of whether there is a transcendent reality serving as a ground of being and value that lies behind the apparent physical order. Faith is uncompelled in its recognition of a transcendent reality because of the extensive degree of cognitive freedom that human beings enjoy regarding ultimate questions of being and value.

Cognitive freedom is an important idea in Hick’s thought. It refers to the range of options or the degree of latitude for a human interpretation in a given situation. The range or latitude will differ in each situation depending upon the nature of the subject matter. In our practical dealings with physical objects, for example, cognitive freedom tends to be far more restricted. If, for example, I see an automobile approaching rapidly toward the intersection that I am about to walk across, the physical circumstances of that situation do not provide me with much room to interpret the situation whether I should walk right in front of the oncoming car. I know that the car will hit me at such close proximity if I try to walk it front of it. My cognitive freedom in that

context is thus very limited. My cognitive freedom increases as I consider what to do about the fact that I notice that the same car is being driven by someone who appears as too young to have a drivers license. I can opt to call the police on my cell phone out of concern for public safety and respect for traffic laws; or I can respond by doing nothing because I might be mistaken about the driver's apparent age and it would thus be unfair to the driver to have to deal with the police because of my mistake; or I can opt to take down the license plate and decide later about what, if anything, I should do. Thus, cognitive freedom exists to a greater degree in the ethical dimension than with considerations of a more physical nature such as walking in front of moving vehicles. My recognition of meanings that give rise to my response to the force of the oncoming vehicle are compelled by sheer mass and velocity, whereas the way I should respond to the possible illegality of an underage driver is not so compelled. Hick believes that cognitive freedom is even more expansive in the religious dimension. Hick explains:

But whereas we can de-emphasize, re-conceive, minimize a moment of moral awareness, thereby deflecting a particular claim on us whilst continuing in general to be ethically responsible human beings, at the religious level we have much more comprehensive capacity to shut out of our consciousness that which we are not ready to face. We are in fact able to exclude the entire religious dimension, experiencing only such forms of meaning as can enter through the filter of a naturalistic world view (*Interpretation* 161).

In the final analysis, Hick views religious faith as an uncompelled interpretive activity whereby the very unrestricted range of cognitive freedom that is available gives room for religious faith to arise as a “fundamental option whereby we come to experience in a religious or non-religious way” (*Interpretation* 159).

Essential to Hick's idea of faith is his philosophic principle of realism. What distinguishes the religious world- view from the naturalistic world-view is the faith that the transcendent reality of supreme value that the religious believer believes in is not ultimately a

figment of the imagination; rather, it is an actual reality that exists regardless of whether human beings think about it. The ultimate object of faith has ontological status. Clearly, Hick recognizes the contribution of the human mind to the religious experience of the transcendent. For that reason, Hick identifies his realism as critical realism, signifying that human beliefs about reality are always subject to critical review because the contributions of human interpretation to belief formation invests beliefs with a subjective element that always invites scrutiny and reevaluation. Thus, while Hick regards faith in general as an act of interpretation in response to a mysterious ambiguity, he thinks of *religious* faith as a response that involves belief in the reality of the transcendent.

Having sought to understand Hick's understanding of what it means to experience life religiously, we can now return to Hick's principle that was quoted near the beginning of this chapter, which I now quote again: "Thus, if in the existing situation of ambiguity a person experiences life religiously, or participates in a community whose life is based upon this mode of experience, he or she is rationally entitled to trust that experience and to proceed to believe and to live on the basis of it." Why does Hick conclude thusly?

The first thing to observe is that Hick views religious belief as something analogous to belief in the existence of an external world (*Interpretation* 213-214). Hick reasons that if compelling theoretical proof were necessary for a person to have a rational belief in something, then it would not be rational for a person to believe in an external world despite the compelling nature of the experiences that would suggest that there really exists an external world. Yet no one would reasonably label as irrational the belief in the external world, even though there is no philosophical argument that would unequivocally and finally establish that belief as true. Sheer physical necessity forces human beings to live and act. In the experience of living and acting

people trust that there are phenomena appearing as realities external to themselves that are actually there. Mistakes, illusions, delusions and even hallucinations can occur. However, the general notion based on experience that there is an external world is undoubtedly a rational notion to hold. Similarly, Hick argues that religious belief in the transcendent can be a basic experience that individuals can trust as veridical. Just as belief in the external world is an experience that people seem to simply find themselves living in, so too can an experience of living in relation to God or the Tao or the Dharma, to cite some examples, be something that individuals enjoy on a level so basic within their consciousness that its force is at times as compelling as the experience of the external world. To experience life religiously by means of religious concepts that orient one's life in conscious relation to a transcendent reality is a foundational aspect of the life experience of religious persons.

Hick aims to explain how it is rational for a religious person to trust in the experiences that inform his or her religious interpretation of life, whether those experiences belong to one's self or to others. Hick uses the example of Jesus (*Interpretation* 213). The New Testament portrays Jesus as a man for whom belief in a transcendent personal God was simply a given. God the Heavenly Father was a reality for Jesus whose presence was so deeply felt that the very idea of Jesus as someone who doubted God's existence is absurd. Hick urges that the question is not what anyone else makes of Jesus' belief in God. Rather, the appropriate question is whether Jesus was rationally entitled to believe in God on the basis of his powerful experience of the divine reality. Hick answers that question by explaining that for Jesus,

it was entirely rational to believe that God is real; and it indeed it would have been irrational on his part not to. For unless we trust our own experience we can have no reason to believe anything about the nature, or indeed the existence of the universe in which we find ourselves. . . . Indeed, what we designate as sanity consists in acting on the basis of our putatively cognitive experience as a whole. We cannot go beyond that; for there is no "beyond" to go to, since any further

datum of which we become aware will then form part of our total experience. And if some aspect of it is sufficiently intrusive or persistent, and generally coherent with the rest, to reject it would in effect be to doubt or own sanity and would amount to a kind of cognitive suicide. One who has a powerful and continuous sense of existing in the presence of God *ought* therefore to be convinced that God exists. Accordingly, the religious person, experiencing life in terms of the divine presence, is rationally entitled to believe what he or she experiences to be the case – namely that God is real, or exists (*Interpretation* 216).

What Hick means by all this is basically that if we continually experience something strongly as real, then such an experience should be trusted if it squares with or does not violate the rest of our experience in which we place our trust. In the case of religious experience, if a person discounts religious experience despite its persistent power and its coherence with the rest of his basic experience, then that person is arbitrarily withholding his trust from one part of his experience while placing trust in another part of experience when there is no significant difference between those two parts of experience that would justify the disparate treatment.

From this it follows as a corollary that not everything that is experienced religiously is worthy of belief simply because of the intensity of conviction that attends the experience. Part of the justification of religious belief, as indicated, consists in showing the coherence between the religious belief and the rest of our established convictions. For example, Jim Jones and the 900 or so followers that committed mass suicide in Guyana in 1978 may have had a powerful sense that their religious beliefs that accounted for the suicides were true. However, those same religious beliefs run so far afoul of the moral sensibilities that form such an important part of our experience that we should say that those unfortunate enough to have participated in the Jonestown massacre were not rationally justified but tragically delusional.

Finally, one should consider the rationality of religious belief in those who do not have the continually intense experiences like those that Hick would label saints or *mahatmas*. Besides

Jesus, Hick would list persons such as Moses, St. Paul, Catherine of Genoa, Muhammad, al-Hallaj, Ramajuna, Guru Nanak, and Ramakrishna as those persons whose experience of the transcendent was so powerful and persistent as to provide a very robust rational justification for their religious beliefs (*Interpretation* 221). Is the more ordinary religious believer – one whose sense of the sacred is not nearly as intense but perhaps contains glimmers and echoes of the divine – also rationally justified in following the lead of the spiritual giants? Hick says yes. He notes that while a more ordinary believer may not have the same depth of experience to fortify her against skeptical attacks, the rationality of religious belief in such a person is sufficiently grounded (*Interpretation* 218-219). It is not my aim to enter into a discussion about the epistemological merits of this view) Hick believes such a person can be aided especially by natural or philosophical theology that can defend the plausibility of belief from the standpoint of internal consistency and coherence. By the same token, philosophical analysis and argument can likewise serve to bolster the beliefs of those faith traditions outside the monotheistic faiths alongside which natural theology developed.

In the ultimate analysis, Hick's understanding of religious experience sets the stage for the development of his pluralistic hypothesis. All human experience is a concept laden and interpretive phenomena. The more ambiguous the environment in which human beings find themselves is, the more cognitive freedom they naturally enjoy with which to respond to the reality that is present in their awareness. Since the awareness of reality is itself always mediated by the concepts that culture gives us, the religious experiences of humankind will be as heterogeneous as the cultures themselves, which is made all the more diverse by the inherent ambiguity of the universe. Thus, it seems that there are two basic considerations leading Hick toward positing a kind of epistemic parity among post-axial faiths. The first is the inherent

ambiguity of the universe which would appear to mitigate strongly against any claim of rational superiority by one religious tradition. The second would be the epistemic parity that is suggested by the dual notions that rationality entails adherence to what experience imposes and that the religious experience of humankind shares in the same basic features that have been delineated and explained in this chapter. With these two considerations now in place, the task of the next chapter will be to build upon them. If an inherent existential ambiguity lurks perennially behind the question of what is ultimately real, and if religious experience occurs through the same kind of interpretive process across cultures, what can we say about the contrasting and sometimes conflicting truth claims that the post-axial religions have been making? The way that Hick approaches this question and the solution he proposes are what the next chapter is about.

CHAPTER THREE

The Transcendent and the Soteriological

The previous chapter showed how Hick understands religious experience and why he considers it to provide the best, if not the only, rational justification for the religious beliefs one might hold. We now turn to look at how Hick applies this principle within the context of the diversity of belief among the post-axial religious traditions. For example, Christianity maintains the existence of a triune personal deity as the ultimate reality whose second person became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth; Islam holds to a strict and personal monotheism revealed normatively and universally in the Koran; Taoism subscribes to the Tao as the ultimate ground of being beyond categories; whereas some of the traditions of India include systems that allow for multiple kinds of divine incarnations and adhere to the belief in the impersonal Brahman; while others hold to the more personal forms of Vishnu and Shiva; whereas Buddhism is characterized often if not always as a non-theistic religious system for liberating individuals from the impersonal cosmic forces that none of the post-axial faith traditions that are indigenous to the near east or in China would recognize as real.. In taking the principle that religious belief is rationally justified by religious experience and applying that principle to the diversity of post-axial religious beliefs, Hick concludes that the same principle justifies the rationality of each of the central post-axial beliefs even though they can conflict with one another. Thus, “belief in the reality of Allah, Vishnu, Shiva and of the non-personal Brahman, Dharmakaya, Tao, seems to be as experientially well based as belief in the reality of the Holy Trinity”(Dialogues 37).

To begin to understand why Hick takes this approach to religious diversity, we can consider some of the things Hick says in response to the claims of those Christian philosophers of religion who maintain that it is rational to assert that Christianity is truer than all other religious traditions. For example, Hick contrasts his general position with that of William Alston. Hick says that he shares with Alston the view that “the most viable defense of religious belief has to be a defense of the rationality of basing beliefs (with many qualifying provisos which Alston has carefully set forth) on religious experience.” Further, Hick notes that Alston himself acknowledges that the significant differences among experientially justified beliefs within the post-axial faiths poses the biggest problem for Alston’s non-pluralist position. Alston would regard Christianity as the true religious tradition and thus normative for religious belief. Hick describes Alston’s solution to the problem as one whereby Alston argues that a Christian, in facing the diversity of experientially justified non-Christian beliefs, should remain Christian because there is no reason to believe any of the other religious traditions are superior. Hick quotes Alston as saying “In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world...” (*Dialogues* 25).

Hick finds an underlying flaw in Alston’s view. Hick urges that Alston is mistakenly assuming that only one religion can be the true one. The problem Hick has with this assumption is that it undercuts the viability of religious experience as a justification for religious belief. If only one religion can be true, then, it follows that religious experience generally produces false beliefs. What Hick appears to mean is that if only one religion is supposed to be true, then religious experience becomes epistemically unreliable because it is producing so many more

false beliefs in the religious traditions outside the true religion. The total number of religious beliefs that the religious experiences of the post axial religious traditions produce far outnumber the number of supposed true beliefs contained in the supposed one true religion. The analysis here is seems rather statistical. For the sake of argument, let us say that there are 10 post-axial religions. On the assumption that only one post-axial religion is true, the probability that any one of them is false is like the probability of drawing an orange out of a hat containing 10 pieces of fruit where 9 are apples and only one is an orange. The hat that contains the fruits would be like the phenomena of religious experience that produces religious beliefs. A person doesn't have a way know whether he or she is going to grab the orange before reaching into the hat, which makes it unlikely to a neutral observer that the hand that has reached inside the hat has grabbed an orange. Likewise, on the assumption that only one religion is true, then without any way to know which religious experience produces true beliefs, an impartial observer must conclude that any given post-axial religious experience is producing false beliefs. (Recall that Hick would not credit natural theology or any other kind of philosophical argument as able to resolve conflicting experiential claims.) Therefore, if only one religion can be true, we are, in keeping with Hick, forced to characterize post-axial religions as too fraught with improbable beliefs to allow for much more than epistemic paralysis. In other words, if one and only one religion is true, and if I can't know which one it is, then the odds that the religion I believe in, along with all the others except one, is false. And, if we take the logic of the situation seriously, the rational choice to make may very well not be to sit tight and stay within my own religion as Alston recommends. The rational thing to do could be not to believe strongly, if at all, in anything.

Whether Hick would agree with the statistical characterization presented above, he certainly would observe, and does so observe, that skepticism is a logical consequence of

supposing that only one religion is the true one. Skepticism is what Hick wants to avoid because he wants to maintain that post-axial religions are cognitive responses to transcendent reality rather than mere illusions or projections. Hick believes such skepticism is avoidable. That is, we do not need to understand religious experience in terms of a false either/or: either religious experience produces only one true religion along with many false ones or religious experience is unreliable because it generates false beliefs more often than not. Rather, Hick contends that instead of this either/or approach, we should take a both/and approach: We can regard religious experience as both as a valid basis for belief formation and as validly instantiated in *each of the different post-axial religious belief systems*.

The way that Hick believes this both/and approach is sustainable is “by appealing to the distinction between God/the Ultimate/the Real/the Transcendent *an sich* and that ultimate reality as variously humanly conceived, and thus variously humanly experienced, and hence variously humanly responded to in historical forms of life” (*Dialogues* 27). In other words, Hick, echoing Immanuel Kant, draws the fundamental distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*; between the divine reality as that transcendent reality exists in itself (“*an sich*”), and that same divine reality as it is humanly experienced by means of the concepts that filter it into experience but that cannot in any way depict the transcendent with any transparency. Since the ultimate transcendent reality exists beyond the reach of human thought, our human concepts, thoughts, ideas and cognition are, Hick argues, simply inadequate to convey anything about the ultimate transcendent reality. The term that Hick eventually adopts to refer to the ultimate transcendent reality embraced by religious faith is the term “the Real.” In contrast to the Real *an sich*, the Real as humanly experienced takes the various forms of what Hick calls divine *personae* and divine *impersonae*. The divine *personae* refer to the concepts for ultimate reality that regard it as

a personal, such as the Holy Trinity, Allah and Yahweh. The divine *impersonae* refer to the more impersonal concepts of the ultimate reality such as, for example, Brahaman, Tao, and Dharmakaya.

As Immanuel Kant posited the *ding an sich*, the thing in itself, as the unknowable reality that lay hidden behind any given appearance of something and which combines with the categories of human thought to make experience possible, John Hick posits the Real *an sich* as the indescribable transcendent reality beyond all categories and concepts which is nonetheless mediated by and through human concepts and categories to make religious experience possible. Although the Real is beyond concepts, Hick nonetheless resorts to concepts to convey the presence of the Real. Hick often uses the term “impinge” to indicate the way the Real is present as a reality. The Real is also universally present, according to Hick, which is another example of the unavoidability using concepts in relation to what is allegedly beyond concepts. These oddities notwithstanding, Hick insists that the Real is beyond the categories of human thought. Indeed, just as there is a gulf between Kant’s noumenal world of things in themselves and the phenomenal world of things as constituted by human thought – a gulf which human thought cannot traverse – there is also non-traversable gulf between Hick’s ineffable Real *an sich* and the divine *personae* and *impersonae* that are its’ manifestations. Hick writes,

It follows from this distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperientable ground of that realm. For whereas the phenomenal world is structured by our own conceptual frameworks, its noumenal ground is not. We cannot even speak of this as a thing or entity (*Interpretation* 246).

In Hick's outlook, the divine *personae* and *impersonae*, as phenomenal manifestations of the real, are each joint by products of the universal presence of the Real and the human responses thereto. The *personae* and *impersonae* are partially human projections insofar as the human mind employs conceptual schemes and spiritual practices in giving the manifestations their individual identities and characters. The *personae* and *impersonae* are partially accounted for as well by the universal presence of the Real. Although the Real is ineffable and beyond human thought, to postulate its presence must mean more than to posit some static reality that has no relation whatsoever to human thought and activity. If, as Hick believes, religious beliefs and practices are not illusory but veridical in character, human concepts and practices cannot alone account for the divine *personae* and *impersonae*. Accordingly, the Real assumes a causal role in the production of its' manifestations in the *personae* and *impersonae* themselves by being that which evokes the culturally varied human responses that comprise the diverse spectrum of religious faiths and practices.

A question arises: why does Hick refer to ultimate reality in the singular as *the* Real? If the Real cannot be said to be one or many or it cannot be spoken of as a thing or entity, on what basis does Hick employ the definite article? Hick states that there is no reason, *a priori*, to refer to ultimate reality in the singular rather than the plural (*Interpretation* 248). The reason he offers for using the singular is that it is simpler to do so. Simplicity is frequently thought of as a cardinal virtue of theoretical explanation. Occam's razor is not a novelty! Since the post-axial religions all refer to a transcendent ultimate, and since Hick's religious pluralism maintains the equal truth of the post-axial religions then it is more reasonable to speak of the Real in the singular. Furthermore, Hick argues that to suppose a plurality of transcendent realities would land one in a morass of intellectual difficulties in trying to spell out the relationship between

them. Hick basically finds absurd the idea of a pluralistic theory that holds that ultimate reality consists of multiple natures (*Christian Theology* 70).

Accordingly, Hick spells out positive grounds to why it is reasonable for his adoption of the view as the Real as singular. Singularity enables the ultimate objects of religious devotion of the post-axial religions to be legitimately regarded as veridical even though they differ significantly from each other in ways that would make them contradictory in relation to each other from a literal standpoint. Hick explains,

But if the Real in itself is not and cannot be humanly experienced, why postulate such an unknown and unknowable *Ding An Sich*? The answer is that the divine noumenon is a necessary postulate of the pluralistic religious life of humanity. For within each tradition, we regard as real the object of our worship or contemplation. If, as I have already argued, it is also proper to regard as real the objects of worship or contemplation of the other traditions, we are led to postulate the Real *an sich* as the presupposition of the veridical character of this range of forms of religious experience. Without this postulate, we should be left with a plurality of *personae and impersonae* each of which is claimed to be the Ultimate. We should have either to regard all the reported experiences as illusory or else return to the confessional position in which we affirm the authenticity of our own stream of religious experience whilst affirming as illusory those occurring in other traditions (*Interpretation* 249).

In fact, Hick states, “the difference between affirming and not affirming the Real is the difference between a religious and a naturalistic interpretation of religion in [its’] variety of forms”(*Dialogues*, 191). So it appears that Hick is characterizing religious pluralism as the viable alternative between naturalism’s denial of the transcendent, and any of the forms of exclusivism or inclusivism that would claim to have the true account of the transcendent. And in order for pluralism to work, Hick appeals to an ineffable unity behind the multiplicity of religious faiths. By Hick’s reasoning, if a person adopts confessional or exclusivistic approach, then he or she falls prey to the naturalist’s skepticism. This is because the same appeal to experience that the exclusivist uses to exclude other religious traditions as candidates for true

religion can be used by adherents of competing faiths so that, in the end, the truth claims of the various faith traditions cancel out each other. But since a thoroughgoing skepticism is not an option for Hick, the task is to show how the divine *personae* and *impersonae* of the post-axial traditions are each and all veridical in some important sense, despite the contrariety and sometimes contradictory relationship of the major truth claims that are found within the various faith traditions.

The way Hick goes about resolving the contrariety among the beliefs of the post-axial faiths is by using the idea of the Real to try to show that, in an ultimate sense, there is no contrariety. If any and all of the divine *personae* and divine *impersonae* are not what is ultimately real despite being regarded as such within each tradition, then, ultimately speaking, they are not contradictory. The Real *an sich* is what is ultimately real. The divine *personae* and *impersonae* are responses to the Real *an sich* that do not literally describe anything about it because the Real as the noumenal ground of the divine *personae* and *impersonae* is beyond description. Thus, the attempts at the description of ultimate reality, which the *personae* and *impersonae* represent, do not contradict one another with respect to ultimate reality because none of them can be true or false in a literal sense. Literal truth and literal falsity are not properties of statements about ultimate reality any more than color is a property of sound. To make statements about something means to use concepts and purport to make descriptions. But the nature of the Real as Hick regards it is beyond description and conceptualization. Therefore, one would not say the Real is this or that for a reason similar or analogous to why one would not say “I heard the bell sound purple.”

But does this mean that the post-axial religious descriptions of ultimate reality are meaningless or refer to nothing at all? There are many people who would say that “I hear the bell

sound purple” is meaningless and thus nonsensical. That might be the case, but notice that I drew an analogy and not a logical equivalence between trying to describe the Real and using colors to describe sounds. This is because Hick would say that the divine *personae* and *impersonae* that purport to describe ultimate reality are not meaningless but actually have a kind of truth-value. Recall that Hick states that the Real *an sich* is postulated as the presupposition of the ***veridical character*** of the range of the various forms of religious experience. And as explained in the previous chapter, Hick is committed to realism, a critical realism that regards the various divine *personae* and *impersonae* as dispositions toward something real rather than something illusory, even though those dispositions use concepts and are thus limited in meaning to the phenomenal world. Thus, the question becomes how can the various beliefs in the transcendent, exemplified by the divine *personae* and *impersonae*, enjoy cognitive contact with the Real if literal truth and falsity do not apply to the Real?

Hick’s answer is to adopt a criterion of what he calls mythological truth. The truth of a religious belief does not depend on whether it accurately describes ultimate reality. Rather, the truth of a religious belief depends on whether it is an ***appropriate response*** to the Real. Hick defines a myth as “a story or statement which is not literally true but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject matter.” (*Interpretation* 248). Put a little differently, Hick states that “the propositions affirmed by a religious tradition are to be understood mythologically rather than literally, i.e. true or false in the practical sense of orienting us rightly or wrongly in life” (*Problems* 106-107). For Hick, to be oriented rightly or wrongly in life is about one’s orientation to the Real.

For we exist inescapably in relation to the Real, and in all that we do and undergo we are inevitably having to do with it in and through our neighbors and our world. Our attitudes and actions are accordingly appropriate or inappropriate not only in relation to our physical and social environments but also in relation to our ultimate environment. And

true religious myths are accordingly those that evoke in us attitudes and modes of behavior which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real (*Interpretation* 248).

What does it mean to say that religious myths are true in the sense that they evoke appropriate attitudes and behavioral responses to the Real? The answer is the *personae* and *impersonae* are authentic manifestations of the Real to the extent that they serve to place human beings in a state of “soteriological alignment” (*Interpretation* 248). Therefore, mythical truth consists in reliable soteriology rather than the literal correspondence between statements about ultimate reality and ultimate reality itself. A question arises: If the truth of people’s beliefs about ultimate reality do not determine the religious truth that is present in a religious tradition, can someone be rightly aligned with the Real while disbelieving in a transcendent ground of value? Can a naturalist or atheist be soteriologically aligned with the Real? For Hick the answer is yes. Hick speaks of “the universal presence of the Real” to which people without any religious faith at all are increasingly responding in appropriate ways, which includes a sense of responsibility to make the world better by seeking justice and promoting peace and by a life of service (*Interpretation* XLI). Hick acknowledges that his view amounts to a kind of unavoidable inclusivism, of which is “from a religious standpoint, an entirely appropriate inclusivism” (*Problems* 83). However, Hick adds that there is an immense intellectual difference between a naturalistic interpretation of the universe and a religious one. He does not want his inclusivism toward naturalists to diminish this difference, adding that respect for naturalists does not entail acceptance of their interpretation as true. Hick adds that the difference between a religious interpretation of the universe and a naturalistic one is resolvable in principle by eschatological verification, which means that the truth of a religious interpretation is susceptible to being made evident in an afterlife, although what such evidence would look like cannot be specified in much

if any detail. So it appears that while Hick does not employ a correspondence theory of truth in evaluating the particular beliefs of the individual post-axial religions, he retains the idea of truth as correspondence for the general religious proposition that there exists a transcendent reality which naturalism does not acknowledge. In any event, it is evident that Hick's pluralism is a kind of inclusivistic pluralism.

To try to understand what Hick has in mind with the idea of soteriological alignment, it might be helpful to discuss his views on the soteriological nature of post-axial religion. In Hick's view, the function of post-axial religion is to provide contexts for human transformation from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness (*Interpretation* 300). This is how post-axial religion at its most general level orients human beings appropriately in relation to the Real. Hick characterizes the post-axial faiths as being soteriologically oriented as evidenced by a general soteriological structure that they all share. This orientation and structure has three discernible aspects. The first two Hick sets out in contrasting post-axial religion with pre-axial religion, which he also refers to as "archaic religion:"

Whilst archaic religion accepted life as it is and sought to continue it on a stable basis, there came through the outstanding figures of the axial period [e.g. Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad] the disturbing and yet uplifting thought of a limitlessly better possibility. . . . Whereas in the various forms of pre-axial religion there had always been a realistic awareness of suffering, insecurity and mortality, in the great post-axial religions these are now thought of in terms implying a contrast with something fundamentally different – whether that different state lies in the future (as also perhaps in the remote past) or in the unrealized depths of the present moment. Thus Christianity speaks of redemption and eternal life; Judaism of the coming kingdom of God; Islam of judgment and paradise; Hinduism of moksha; Buddhism of enlightenment and nirvana. Behind and giving substance to these varied conceptions of a limitlessly better state is the awareness of an ultimate unity of reality and value.

Thus, the first two parts of the soteriological structure of post-axial religion are an identification of what plagues the human spirit, and a strong sense of and faith in a reality that transcends the

limits of finite existence, which also offers the hope that what is most undesirable about life cannot ruin human existence or render it meaningless. This outlook is what Hick refers to as the “cosmic optimism” of the post-axial religions (*Interpretation* 56).

The third aspect of the soteriological structure consists in offering a way to realize the optimally better state of human existence according to whatever the concrete and historical particularities are of a post-axial religious tradition’s myth and tradition:

This might be by self-committing faith in Christ as one’s lord and savior; or by the total submission to God which is *islam*; or by faithful obedience to the Torah; or by transcendence of the ego, with its self-centered desires and cravings to attain *moksa* or Nirvana. . . . [T]hese are variations within different conceptual schemes on a single fundamental theme: the sudden or gradual change of the individual from an absorbing self-concern to a new centering in the supposed unity-of-reality-and-value that is thought of as God, Brahman, the Dharma, Sunyata or the Tao. Thus the generic concept of salvation/liberation, which takes a specific form in each of the great traditions, is that of the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness (Hick, *Interpretation* 36).

A notable development can be observed. This chapter began by taking up the epistemological implications of Hick’s theory of religious experience. We saw how Hick argues that the reliability of religious experience as a basis for religious belief entails that epistemic parity exists among the post-axial religions; otherwise, religious experience turns out to be unreliable because it produces more false beliefs than true ones or religious adherents are forced to withdraw into their confessional fortresses with no way to determine whose is the true fortress. Having begun with epistemology, we now find ourselves in soteriology. And the relationship between epistemic and soteriological concerns in Hick’s thought reveals the particular way that Hick has maneuvered through what I would identify as the double aspect of the idea of religious truth.

The double aspect of religious truth is indicated in Hick’s contrast above between literal truth and mythical truth. The former concerns propositional accuracy. The latter has to do with

practical or soteriological efficacy. There are many persons who, not subscribing to the distinction that Hick makes between the Real *an sich* as beyond human conception and the Real as humanly experienced, believe that their beliefs about ultimate reality are true in fact, and either true or false in principle. That is, the propositions about reality by which their religious beliefs can be expressed either describe what is actually the case or they don't. On Hick's view, by contrast, any such propositions about the ultimate *cannot* describe what is because the ultimate is beyond description. Thus, by Hick's reckoning, the pragmatic or soteriological efficacy of a religious belief is not determined by any supposed correspondence between religious thought and religious ultimate reality i.e. between the contents of a religious belief and the actual nature of the Real. By contrast, those persons who would insist that religious propositions are accurate or inaccurate in principle often are more apt to say that the soteriological efficacy of a religious tradition stems at least partially, if not to a great extent, from the accuracy of its' beliefs or propositions about ultimate reality. This supposed connection between propositional accuracy about ultimate reality and soteriological efficacy is precisely what Hick is severing. In Hick's view, ultimate reality, the Real, is beyond human concepts. If it is beyond human concepts, no proposition about ultimate reality can be true in the sense of propositional accuracy because to be accurate in one's propositions presupposes that one is dealing with something that can be described. So in Hick's outlook, religious truth as propositional accuracy has no currency and all we are left with is religious truth as soteriological efficacy. This is why a discussion of Hick's epistemology of religious pluralism so easily passes over into soteriology. Epistemology is concerned with the meaning and the conditions for human knowledge. But if knowledge is not possible as to beliefs about the nature of the Real, then all competition among religious traditions as to whose religious propositions are most accurate is

eliminated because none of the truth claims of any religious traditions can describe the Real. None of the beliefs that purport to qualify as true beliefs can be more successful than others. In fact, certain of Hick's own comments about the truth of religious beliefs reveal a kind of conceptual relativism:

Religious beliefs can be true or false in two different senses and in two different contexts. They are literally or analogically true or false (analogy being stretched literality) of the manifestation of the Real which is their intentional object – for example, the Christian Trinity, the Allah of Islam, the Brahman of Hindu thought. And, in so far as they are literally or analogically true of the manifestation of the Real, they are mythologically true of the Real itself. They are mythologically true in so far as the dispositional response which they tend to evoke is appropriate to an authentic manifestation of the Real, and so to the Real in itself. For that such manifestation is authentic means that it is in soteriological alignment with the Real (*Problems* 26).

The implication that can be drawn out of the foregoing passage is that Hick's distinction between the Real in itself and the Real as a phenomenal manifestation entails a kind of epistemic relativism with respect to religious beliefs about the different phenomenal manifestations. The different manifestations of the Real such as the Christian Trinity, Allah, Brahman, the Tao, and so forth, have a relation to the Real in terms of literal truth that is analogous to the relationship between the human activity of law-making and the particular laws of the plethora of sovereign entities. In the sovereign state of Arkansas, it is true to say, for example, that the statute of limitations for filing a complaint for personal injury is three years. But it is false to say that the statute of limitations for personal injury actions in Georgia is three years because in Georgia it is two years. Accordingly, while a claim about what the law is in a sovereign state of Georgia is literally true only according to the sources of law within Georgia, a religious truth claim about the Christian Trinity, for instance, can be evaluated for its literal truth or falsity only insofar as it coincides with supposed normative canons within the Christian tradition, *even though* claims about the Christian Trinity commonly purport to disclose the nature of the ultimate ground of

reality in relation to which all human beings stand in fundamental relation. Thus, whether or not Christian beliefs about the Trinity contain literal truth has no bearing on the literal truth about Allah as found in the Islamic tradition. If one were to claim that the ultimate reality is comprised of triune Father/Son/Holy Spirit, such a claim would be literally true within the Christian tradition and that claim would be literally false about the Allah of the Islamic faith. Likewise, if someone were to claim that the main properties of ultimate reality are *sat*, *chit* and *ananada*, then relative to Brahman that may be a literally true description but relative to the eternal Tao, the statement is not literally true. And relative to ultimate reality, *sat*, *chit* and *ananda* do not apply and are thus neither true nor false in a literal sense.

What follows from Hick's view is that it makes no sense to adjudicate between Christianity and Islam, Hinduism and Taoism, or between any two or more post-axial faiths, as to which provides a truer account of the ultimate transcendent reality. The Real is beyond human concepts. And as Hick has stated, "the different belief systems are about *different* manifestations of the Real. They're not mutually conflicting beliefs, because they're beliefs about different phenomenal realities" (Christian Theology 43). Thus, on Hick's account of the literal truth of religious claims, such claims can be true or false relative to a divine *personae* or *impersonae* as a manifestation of ultimate reality. However, religious claims cannot be literally true in an ultimate or absolute, since literal truth or falsity with respect to the Real in itself is not possible, there can be no normative vantage point from which to determine whether one post-axial traditions contain beliefs that have better literal correspondence to the Real. None of the traditions do. And thus the traditions cannot be in conflict over something that none of them are actually doing.

So, for those who would either subscribe to Hick's distinction between the Real in itself and the Real as humanly experienced, or for those who would stipulate to the distinction for the

sake of discussion, one must turn to soteriology to look for a more universal criterion for religious truth rather than the epistemology of religious belief. The nature and purpose of post-axial religion dictates that this must be so. This is because the function of post-axial religion “is to create contexts in which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality- centeredness can take place” (*Interpretation* 300). Accordingly, the basic criterion by which to evaluate religions is soteriological. Religious traditions have truth and value to the extent that they promote salvific transformation.

What we will find when we look into Hick’s soteriological criterion is that he has once again formulated the essential terms of his religious hypothesis so that soteriological equality among post-axial religions becomes more probable. Hick defines salvation not in terms of an afterlife, but in terms of the present life:

Suppose, then, that we define salvation in a very concrete way, as an actual change in human beings, a change which can be identified – when it *can* be identified – by its’ moral fruits. We then find that we are talking about something that is of central concern to each of the great world faiths. Each in its different way is calling us to transcend the ego point of view, which is the source of all selfishness, greed, exploitation, cruelty and injustice, and to become re-centered in that ultimate mystery for which we, in our Christian language, use the term God (*Christian Theology* 17).

How do we know if salvific transformation is taking place? Hick’s offers criteria, one that he believes is sufficiently general or universal for his purposes rather than too tradition specific. The great religious traditions all seem to concur, Hick argues, that genuine or authentic religion is distinguishable from mere nominal religion by the observable effects or manifestations of goodness in the life of a religious adherent. Hick alludes to the Christian idea of the “fruits of the spirit” as exemplifying a notion to which the post-axial religions would all subscribe. Hick reasons that “the fruits of the spirit are universally recognized and respected whereas the value of creedal and communal loyalty presupposes the accident of birth at one

particular time and place”(*Interpretation* 301). We are to recognize salvific transformation by its’ spiritual and moral fruits. Hick resorts to the old adage “know a tree by its fruits” and makes it a central principle of his soteriological criteria. As we will soon see in more detail, Hick employs this principle to argue basically that if the post-axial religions are all trees that bear fruit, we aren’t able to determine which among the trees has more fruit or better fruit, so we therefore have to say that all the trees are equally good.

Hick selects the concept of saintliness to refer in a generic way to individuals who have been recognized throughout the history of post-axial religions as persons in whom salvific transformation has taken place to a degree exceeding that of most people. “A saint, then, is one in whom the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness is so much more advanced than in the generality of us that it is readily noticed and acknowledged” (*Interpretation* 301). Hick observes that while saints can be found throughout post-axial religious traditions and are recognized within their respective traditions as exemplary models of their particular tradition’s ideals, there is something that saints share in common: “This is a transcendence of the ego point of view and replacement by devotion to or centered concentration upon some manifestation of the Real, response to which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life” (*Interpretation* 301). Hick adds that saints express their saintliness in various forms, which can include a contemplative life, a life of charitable works, a life of political action or others. What Hick finds compelling about saints for the purposes of his pluralistic hypothesis is that “we can readily see that each of the great world faiths constitutes a context for salvation/liberation: for each has produced its own harvest of saints” (*Interpretation* 307). And not only have the contexts for salvation/liberation that the great faiths have provided led to the production of saints, but salvation/liberation has been occurring in various although

less striking degrees within many persons who have belonged to a faith tradition. Saints are not traveling along a different path than their fellow devotees; they are simply further along the path.

Among the different aspects of saintliness, one to which Hick gives probably the most emphasis is that of moral goodness (*Interpretation* 309). Hick contends that the Golden Rule provides the basic and universal moral criterion for the moral assessment of religious phenomena. The Golden Rule, whether expressed in positive form (do unto others as you would have them to unto you) or negative form (do not do to another what you would not have done unto you), is an expression of the most basic moral principle shared by all the great religious traditions. Hick explains:

From a religious point of view, we must [sic] assume the rooting of moral norms in the structure of our human nature and the rooting of that nature in our relationship to the Real. The central moral claim upon is accordingly to behave in accordance with our own true nature, from which we have fallen into sin or into the darkness or confusion of *avidya*. The ethical insights of the great teachers are visions of human life lived in earthly alignment with the Real, insights either heard as divine commands or intuited as the eternal truth of the Dharma or Tao or Logos. Implicit within these we can discern the utterly basic principle that it is evil to cause suffering to others and good to benefit others and to alleviate or prevent their sufferings. This is so fundamentally and universally accepted a principle that it is seldom formulated. And yet if all human beings lived in accordance with it, there would be no wars, no injustice, no crime, no needless suffering (*Interpretation* 312).

Hick does not want to be understood to mean that morally good or altruistic behavior is somehow constitutive of salvation/liberation. Rather, altruistic behavior is the natural fruit and observable sign of a deep reorientation from natural self-centeredness to a life centered upon the Real. In other words, the reorientation that takes place in salvific transformation is more than ethical living. For example, a sense of joy and peace, an appreciation for beauty, a sense of humor – these interior dispositions are widely considered as attributes of a saint even though ethical virtues are not synonymous with them. However, as evidence of salvific transformation,

the interior dispositions of the saint may be harder more often to discern than is the overt conduct involved in dealing with other people. Since Hick's religious pluralism maintains that the post-axial faiths are equally true, and since he takes religious truth to mean soteriological efficacy, then a criterion that concerns what is more easily observable is naturally more useful for Hick in adducing evidence for his pluralistic hypothesis.

This brings us face to face with the question of religious truth. It is evident from Hick's comments about saintliness that Hick finds at least some truth in all the post-axial faiths because he thinks that the manifestations of the Real within each of the great faiths have evoked responses marked by salvific transformations. And according to Hick's pluralistic outlook, we are not able to say that one religious tradition is truer than others because we cannot say that one tradition is better than others in producing individuals who are rightly oriented in relation to the Real. Hick argues that such comparative judgments are not feasible:

But if we now attempt comparative judgments, asking whether tradition A has produced more, or better, saints per million of population than tradition B, we quickly discover that we do not have sufficient information for an answer. All that I myself feel able to venture at present is the impressionistic judgment that no one tradition stands out as more productive of sainthood than another. I suggest that so far as we can tell they constitute to about the same extent contexts within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place(*Interpretation* 307).

And furthermore:

Taking the great world traditions as totalities, we can only say that each is a unique mixture of good and evil. Each has been and is responsible for or associated with immense contributions to human welfare; each has also been and is responsible for or implicated in vast evils affecting some part of the human race. It may be the case that from the point of view of omniscience, one tradition stands out as morally superior to all others. But this is not so evident from our partial human perspective. It is not possible, as an unbiased judgment with which all rational persons could be expected to agree, to assert the overall moral superiority of any one of the great religious traditions of the world (*Interpretation* 337).

The logic of Hick's grounds for pluralism has thus become discernible. We can summarize it as follows. The post-axial religions are equally true not because the propositions embodied in their beliefs are demonstrably of equal truth-value. They are equally true for reasons that have nothing to do with the truth-value of propositions. Religious truth means living in right relation to ultimate reality, which Hick calls the Real. The post axial religions are each true because they enable people to be aligned with the Real, as evidenced by each religious tradition having individuals whose lives exemplify a transformed human existence, whereby life is lived in saintliness for the sake of the Real as that which is of ultimate importance as opposed to a life lived as if self was of supreme value. The post axial religions are equally true, not because there is positive evidence that shows the saintliness is present to the same extent in each of the religious traditions, but because we cannot identify evidence that would prove conclusively that any one religious tradition was more saintly than another.

This chapter has set forth the main ingredients of Hick's pluralism. We began the chapter with Hick's view of the epistemic parity of the post-axial faiths that is based on idea that the post-axial faiths are each justified on experiential grounds. On the premise that no post-axial faith has a superior claim to experiential justification, Hick postulates the ineffable Real *an sich* as the ultimate transcendent reality in response to which the great religious traditions are cultural manifestations. The Real is what Hick posits as the condition for the possibility of religious truth. Since the Real in itself cannot be conceived, the beliefs and truth claims by the post-axial religions purporting to describe ultimate reality cannot qualify as true in a prepositional or formal sense. Rather, religious truth is properly conceived as mythological truth. The divine personae and impersonae that constitute the concepts of ultimate reality to which the post-axial traditions subscribe are mythologically true because such concepts succeed in helping to transform people

from natural self-centeredness to Reality centeredness, a reorientation of human life characterized by saintliness and evidenced by moral goodness. Such a response to the Real, which Hick calls an appropriate response, is found to be occurring within the post-axial traditions, but it can also be found among people who have no religious faith at all, which thus gives Hick's pluralism an inclusivistic aspect. With these contours of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis now outlined and explained, we now move to the next chapter where we will consider some of the criticisms of Hick's religious pluralism.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Critical Assessment

Hick's pluralistic hypothesis has received a great deal of scrutiny and criticism and Hick himself has devoted considerable attention to framing his responses. In "*A Christian Theology of Religions*" Hick devotes nearly the entire book to answering his critics through imaginary dialogues between a character John, who represents Hick himself, and two characters named Phil and Grace. Hick uses Phil to voice the various objections to the pluralistic hypothesis that are more of a philosophical nature. Grace represents the view of traditional Christianity and raises objections of a more theological tenor that are of particular concern for Christian faith. Since my manuscript is concerned much more with philosophical issues than with Christian theology, this chapter will deal mostly with the kinds of philosophical criticisms voiced by Phil and Hick's responses to them.

This chapter will take a critical look at key features of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis and will use for most of its material certain topics of the imaginary dialogues with Phil. Some specific authors and works that do not appear in *A Christian Theology of Religions*, along with some specific criticisms that Hick does not address in the dialogues, will be incorporated into my discussion. As indicated, I will not visit each topic of the dialogues, nor do I intend to try to provide plenary coverage of the criticisms of Hick's pluralism that appear in the scholarly literature. However, I have selected topics for discussion that relate most directly to the material covered in the first three chapters of this manuscript.

By engaging the issues raised in this chapter, I intend to show in a number of ways in which Hick's theory of religious pluralism is plagued by explanatory deficiency and internal incoherence. My own criticisms of Hick are centered on three fundamental problems. The first problem is that although Hick holds that the Real is ineffable, he makes substantive claims about the Real that are inconsistent with his claim of ineffability. This inconsistency, as we will see, both betrays underlying theoretical problems and generates further problems. The second source of Hick's difficulties is that his ontology implies a radical discontinuity between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal world of human experience, which among other things, makes the idea of soteriological alignment with the Real very problematic. One result of this discontinuity between the ontological and the soteriological realms is that it becomes rather dubious for Hick to claim that the moral goodness of a religion is evidence that it is an appropriate response to the Real when Hick also insists the concept of goodness or one of its analogues cannot apply to the ineffable Real. Thirdly, the soteriological or ethical criteria that Hick offers to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate responses to the Real is likewise problematic. This is because the criteria are based on a supposed consensus among the post-axial religions that love and compassion are the natural fruits of being appropriately aligned with the Real. Hick's appeal to consensus, however, will be shown to be arbitrary. Furthermore, Hick's ethical criteria ultimately undermine his claims about the ineffability of the Real, particularly his claim that goodness is not attributable to the Real. One topic that will become important for illuminating the fundamental problems in Hick's pluralism is Hick's inclusivism toward atheists, which will be discussed in the latter portions of this chapter. These three general areas that I have here identified as problematic will be explained, and the claims that I make in the course of the explanations will

be justified, during the course of the discussion that follows. To begin that discussion, let me move to the first topic from the imaginary dialogues between Phil and Hick's character, John.

One criticism that Phil voices is that Hick's pluralism homogenizes the post-axial faiths into a false unity. By this Phil means that Hick is abstracting from the post-axial religions some supposed generic similarities to construct a meta-theory that ignores the salient differences between the traditions and thus mischaracterizes each great tradition in its true identity and import. The reality of the relationship between the post-axial faiths is that each stands in relation to the other traditions in its *otherness* from them and not in its sameness to them. That which is real and significant is the concrete and historical, not the generic and the theoretical. Thus, as an interpretation of religion, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis fails because it operates at so high a level of abstraction and sameness that it misrepresents the more important aspects of the religious phenomena that consist in concreteness and difference. Phil insists that Hick is misguided because he fits the religions into a common pattern according to his own theory rather than according to what the religions actually say (Hick, *Christian Theology* 40-41).

Continuing in the same vein, Phil asserts that Hick's pluralism does further injustice to the post-axial religions because his theory contradicts each religion's own self-understanding. The great traditions each maintain that their beliefs express accurate depictions of reality. The great faiths do not understand the truth of their beliefs to be merely relative to their credal heritage and doxatic practices. Rather, the adherents within each tradition commonly regard their central beliefs as universally true. Hick's pluralism discounts the self-understandings that the great religions have about the truth of their beliefs by denying that any of them can be true in anything but a mythological or pragmatic sense (*Christian Theology* 45).

Hick's response to the foregoing line of criticism consists partially in a denial, partially in an acknowledgment, and mainly in an appeal to necessity. First, Hick denies that his pluralism discounts the differences between the post-axial religions. The same thing is not going on in each tradition, as the wide variety and diversity of religious thought and practice attests. Hick says that he expects that each religious community will hold to what is distinctive in its tradition. The pluralistic hypothesis is not meant to discourage traditional beliefs and practices. Hick states that he respects and affirms the traditional beliefs and practices of the great religions as authentic contexts for salvific transformation. The pluralistic hypothesis leaves the religious beliefs of each religious tradition intact, and Hick maintains that he does not propose an overhaul of any of the traditions. Rather, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is a meta-theory that tries to account for the diversity of religious belief and practice in a way that avoids absolutistic exclusivism. Thus, Hick denies that he disregards real differences.

Hick acknowledges that the post-axial faiths traditionally understand their beliefs as being true about reality and not merely true relative to a particular tradition. In this respect, Hick admits that he is proposing that the religious traditions reconsider the nature and scope of their truth claims. However, Hick claims that his suggestion is a virtue and not a vice because the pluralistic hypothesis accounts for a wider range of data than any of the traditional self-understandings. Once it is recognized that the post-axial faiths are practically equal in producing moral and spiritual fruits, one is moved to try to account for such salvific parity with a comprehensive theory. Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is just such an attempt in that it tries to explain the roughly equal salvific efficacy shared by the post-axial faiths despite the often-dramatic diversity of belief and practice. Postulating the Real, as the universal presence in response to which the great religions each uniquely bring about salvation/liberation through

diverse means, enables Hick to offer his comprehensive account. Thus, it is perfectly consistent, Hick argues, for an adherent of a tradition to hold to his or her beliefs with the understanding that concepts he or she employs are about the particular manifestation of ultimate reality as developed within a religious tradition, and not about ultimate reality as it is in itself. Hick's acknowledgment of his theory's departure from traditional religions' self-understandings is qualified by the endorsement of his theory as progressive.

Hick argues that the distinction between the Real *an sich* and the Real as phenomenal manifestation is not only a reasonable and necessary way to account for the diversity of religious belief, the noumenal/phenomenal distinction is necessary as a way to depart from traditional absolutisms. Hick asserts that unless we make such a departure, it is not possible to account fully for the religious value of each post-axial tradition. When Phil asks why this is so, Hick answers:

Because each [tradition], left to itself, affirms its own uniquely full access to the Real, and this affirmation has developed into a structure of belief which can only accommodate other traditions by subordinating them to itself, whether as total errors or as partial truths. And so global interpretation, which starts with the rough salvific parity of the great traditions will not be identical with the belief-system of any one of them. This is why we either have to seek a more comprehensive view or return to the absolutism of our own tradition . . . [Y]ou have to face up to the fact that no hypothesis about the relation between the different world religions – unless it simply affirms the truth of one and the falsity of the rest – is going to be congruent with the belief system of one of them to the exclusion of others. . . . One cannot seek such a comprehensive interpretation and then disqualify any proposal that doesn't simply replicate the particular doctrines of one's own tradition. The options are either to affirm the absolute truth of one's own tradition, or go for some pluralistic view – or of course, have no view and simply regard the whole matter as a mystery (*Christian Theology* 48).

Based on the foregoing material, it appears that Hick believes the post-axial religious traditions each lack the understanding to account appropriately for each other. Thus, Hick seeks a more comprehensive meta-theory from outside the traditions in order to make sense of the global situation of religious diversity.

Hick challenges his critics who would argue that Hick is arrogantly or presumptuously assuming the posture of a neutral observer who sees the full truth from a vantage point that remains hidden from the great faith traditions themselves. Hick asserts that his theory is not presumptuous because it is not espoused as some sort of *a priori* truth to which access is limited only to a few people such as himself. Hick insists the pluralistic hypothesis assumes no high vantage point; rather, his pluralism should be understood more modestly as follows:

The pluralistic hypothesis is arrived at inductively, from ground level. I start out as one committed to the faith that Christian religious experience is not purely a projection but is at the same time a cognitive response to a transcendent reality; and its fruits in Christian lives confirm this to me. I then notice that there are other great world religions likewise reporting their own religious experience, the cognitive character of which is supported in the same way. And so I have to extend to them the same principle that religious experience constitutes a valid basis for religious belief. But I now have on my hands the problem of several conflicting sets of truth-claims which are equally well based in religious experience and confirmed by their fruits. In order to understand this situation, I form the hypothesis of an ultimate divine reality which is being differently conceived, and therefore differently experienced, from within the different religio-cultural ways of being human. This is an hypothesis offered to explain, from a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic point of view, the facts described by the historians of religion. It is an explanatory theory; and I suggest that critics that don't like it should occupy themselves with trying to produce a better one (*Christian Theology* 50).

Since Hick seems wedded to the idea that a grand scale theory is viable, Phil's false homogenization objection is very germane. For false homogenization implies that the truth about particulars is lost and mischaracterized in generality. Wherever such mischaracterization occurs, a grand scale theory falls short because its explanation is obscuring the data it is trying to elucidate. This is the core issue that Phil's false homogenization objection touches upon. I find that Hick's response to the charge of false homogenization does not go so far as to address this core issue. Properly understood, the false homogenization objection to Hick's pluralism does not challenge Hick so much on whether he admits to the scope and depth of religious differences. Rather, the homogenization objection raises the substantial question of whether Hick's grand-

scale account of religious diversity is plausible given the nature and extent of the diversity it is trying to interpret.

An example of Hick's potential shortcoming in this connection is found in a criticism raised by Jung H. Lee. In "Problems of Religious Pluralism: A Zen Critique of John Hick's Ontological Morphism," Mr. Lee propounds the thesis that Hick's religious pluralism is unsuccessful as a global explanation of religious phenomena because it fails to account for Soto Zen Buddhism as represented by the medieval Zen master Doge (Lee). Lee argues that Hick's pluralism lacks explanatory force with respect to Soto Zen. The root of Lee's criticism is that Hick has an alleged theistic bias that expresses itself in an ontology that is radically dissimilar from Soto Zen. The problem that Lee emphasizes is that Hick's idea of the Real *an sich* causes his pluralism to be skewed toward religious traditions that conceive of ultimate reality as the singular, transcendent, originating and sustaining principle of being. Hick alludes to the Real as "an ultimate ineffable Reality which is the source and ground of everything," (*Christian Theology* 27) as well as "single ultimate ground of all human salvific transformation." (*Christian Theology* 69). This depiction of the Real might jibe to greater and lesser degrees with the various forms of monotheism, or even maybe and to a lesser degree with the Tao and Brahman of Chinese and Indian religion respectively. What these forms of post-axial faith have in common is a concept of ultimate reality that can be expressed in terms of a discrete grounding transcendent reality. Soto Zen, however, does not hold to a view of an ultimate metaphysical reality that is a source and sustaining ground of everything.

Lee specifically takes issue with Hick's characterization of *sunyata*, for which the term "emptiness" is considered an appropriate English language translation. What Lee thinks Hick is attempting to do is to recast *Sunyata* away from its' Buddhist moorings in order to force it to

comport with Hick's theory of the Real *an sich*. Hick contends that *sunyata* can be thought of "as the formless self-emptying ground or source of everything," adding further that "[w]hen *sunyata* is understood . . . as referring to the ultimate reality beyond the scope of all concepts, knowable in its manifestations, then it is indeed equivalent to what in our pluralistic hypothesis we are calling the Real" (Hick, Interpretation 291).

However, Lee takes issue with Hick's description of *sunyata*: "It is dubious whether one could categorize emptiness as a 'source,' or even more precariously as an ultimate transcending the flux of change and chance since it seems eminently clear that impermanence is metaphysically non-referential"(Lee). Lee avers that in Soto Zen "[t]here is no reference to a metaphysical reality above and beyond the phenomenal; indeed, the soteriological force of Soto Zen is secured not by an experience of the noumenal, either transcendently or immanently, but by a thoroughgoing acceptance and appreciation of the phenomenal" (Lee).

What is ultimate for Soto Zen is impermanence. Lee points out that for Zen Master Dogen, impermanence is not some kind of discrete metaphysical reality that serves as a source or ground of anything. Rather it is "a phenomenological law governing the dispositional states of all psychophysical operations at work in the experiential world." The "phenomenological law" is that change and decay are continuous in everything, even in Nirvana. The reason that Dogen's understanding of impermanence as ultimate reality does not fit into Hick's pluralism as a manifestation of the Real *an sich* is indicated thusly:

When Dogen says that all things are impermanent, he is not simply stating that some form of 'change' exists as a 'higher' immutable reality out there to be grasped; rather, he seems to be suggesting that impermanence, as a determinative, constituent factor of all phenomena, is occurrent prior to its objectification. He states in the *Ikka myoju* 'Because of its priority over its functional manifestations, this principle remains as something ungraspable even in the midst of its' functioning.' . . . In this way, Dogen denies that impermanence can be experienced as something, not because of any sort of metaphysical

gap (e.g. between the Real *an sich* and the Real as humanly experienced), but rather because of its non-abiding ontological reality (Lee).

Lee distinguishes Dogen's idea of ultimate reality as ontologically non-abiding with Hick's notion of the Real, as the abiding source and ground of everything, in terms of the experience of *zazen* or *satori*:

Within this state, although one is still conscious (i.e., one is still 'thinking' in a 'non-thinking' way) the fetters of discriminative thought patterns are at rest; one achieves awareness per se. Or, as Sallie B. King states 'The mind or Buddha nature is not a thing which perceives, but the act of perceiving itself.' The Zen adept's mental state can be properly described as intentionless (i.e. no object is attended to consciously). On this interpretation, it would seem to take a feat of hermeneutical heroics to construe the experience as in any way concerned with an ontologically ultimate Real *an sich* (Lee).

Thus, Soto Zen's self-understanding appears to be one where soteriology has no relationship to anything that could be described as a source and ground of everything since "source" and "ground" are terms have an abiding and unitary sense to them.

Were Hick to insist that Dogen's concept of impermanence somehow squares with the pluralistic hypothesis because impermanence is instrumental for the soteriological alignment with the Real that occurs in Soto Zen through *satori*, Hick may well be violating his own principle of global interpretation. This problem can become evident to us by considering a section of the dialogues between Phil and Hick's character. In that section, Phil is criticizing Hick for his refusal to attribute goodness to the Real. Phil argues that the Real must have a nature that includes analogues of goodness and love because if it did not, there is no reason why an unloving and cruel deity could not be an authentic manifestation of the Real. Hick's character responds that, despite the force of this argument, he cannot adopt Phil's conclusion "because it violates the principle that any comprehensive interpretation of religion must take account of all the major traditions, and not just of one's own." Hick argues that comprehensiveness dictates

that one postulate the Real as an ineffable ultimate reality that is beyond our human conceptual repertoire. Hick adduces the following line of reasoning in support:

Well, let us suppose, as a thought experiment, that the Real has its analogues of the heavenly Parent, which will include personality, love, goodness, compassion, justice, mercy, power, intentions, consciousness, knowledge. We now have to add that the Real also has its analogues of the attributes of its other authentic personae and impersonae. But this quickly leads to manifest contradictions. The description of the Real will now have to include its being analogically personal and also its being analogically non-personal, analogically conscious and analogically non-conscious, analogically purposive and also analogically non-purposive, analogous to a substance and also analogous to a non-substantial process, and so on. The more you add to the list the more incoherent it becomes (*Christian Theology* 62).

One can now ask how it is that Hick has not violated his own principle by speaking of the Real as an abiding noumenal source and ground of everything –which just so happens to be a way of speaking about ultimate reality that is amenable to his own Kantian flavored Christian monotheism – despite the fact that the non-theistic tradition of Soto Zen regards the ultimate as non-abidingly phenomenal? On the one hand, Hick states that it is impermissible to speak of the Real as analogous to a substance because the principle of comprehensive interpretation would call for him also to speak of the Real as analogous to a non-substantial process. But, on the other hand, Hick doesn't have a problem in speaking of the Real in theistic terms as both an abiding source and ground of everything, even though Soto Zen, a non-theistic tradition, speaks of the ultimate reality of impermanence as that which has no abiding ontological character. Lee's indictment of Hick on grounds of theistic bias is explicit:

It seems as if Hick's theistic bias, as expressed in his partition of an ontologically divine noumenal reality as distinct from a humanly experienced phenomenal reality, spoils the explanatory force and hermeneutical adequacy of his hypothesis when considering the epistemological foundations of the Zen tradition. . . . Although, at times, Hick seems to move away from a metaphysical reading of the Real *an sich*, albeit as an immanent and not a transcendental manifestation within the Buddhist tradition, he inevitably capitulates to the Kantian notion of a 'single divine noumenon,' or the 'Eternal One,' as the foundational ground of Buddhist experience (Lee).

Thus, Jung Lee has posed “the fundamental question of whether Hick’s hypothesis can function as a general theory of religious experience, able to accommodate even those traditions that do not give credence to a metaphysically discrete divine reality”(Lee).

In my view, the answer to Lee’s fundamental question is that if Hick is going to continue to speak of the so-called ineffable Real *an sich* as the source and ground of everything, then Hick’s hypothesis is flawed along the lines that Lee suggests. If the Real is, as Hick asserts, beyond categories and concepts, then there is no justification for Hick calling the Real the source and ground of everything. But if Hick is going to refer to the Real by such terms, then his principle of comprehensive interpretation demands that he refer to the Real also as a groundless and non-abiding non-source in order to accommodate the Soto Zen tradition. Since he does not also refer to the Real as non-abiding, Hick violates his own principle of global interpretation. This is an inconsistency in Hick’s thought which gives resonance to Phil’s earlier objection of false homogenization in a serious way. The idea of false homogenization calls into question the possibility of success for Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis. In this vein, Jung Lee’s critique proves important because Lee reminds us of the sometimes deep metaphysical differences between post-axial traditions that make grand-scale theorizing such as Hick’s problematic. If a pluralistic account is going to try to devise an ontology that accommodates all the great faiths, it faces numerous and difficult challenges, not the least of which is for the theorist to avoid letting his or her own metaphysical tradition to color too much of his or her interpretation of foreign belief systems.

The next of Phil’s criticisms to consider is that the Real is vacuous and redundant. In other words, if the Real is so generic and without distinguishable characteristics that it is beyond concepts and descriptions, then to postulate the Real is vacuous. It is equivalent to asserting

something like “that which is empty of all conceptual content is what I call the Real.” Such an expression is vacuous because it has nothing in it that says what the Real is. The expression is also redundant because you can’t add anything to what has no conceptual content by giving it a name like the Real. Hence, to postulate the Real is to engage in mere tautology. Furthermore, as Phil also indicates, the tautology here is not about something concrete, e.g. “A boy is a boy.” Rather, the tautology is so abstract and vacuous that one should ask, as Phil does, what real difference there truly is between positing the Real’s existence and asserting that the Real does not exist. This line of criticism is developed by Gavin D’Costa:

Hick’s sharp distinction between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal images framed by the human mind within particular cultures reminds me of David Hume’s comment on the supposed religious object of mystics. Hume writes of mystical claims that the Reality confronted is ineffable: ‘Is the name, without any meaning, of such mighty importance? Or how do you mystics who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the deity, differ from skeptics or atheists’. It is precisely this ‘absolute incomprehensibility regarding the nature of reality that threatens Hick’s whole pluralistic project by further mystifying rather than illuminating the nature of the Real through this Kantian development. One may ask with Hume whether such a position as Hick’s is any different from atheism or skepticism or, equivalently, a transcendental agosticism. . . . One may therefore ask whether the Real’s invulnerability also leads to its redundancy (D’Costa 9).

Hick’s response to his critics on this count is to assert that he is not saying that the Real does not have a nature, but only that its nature cannot be humanly expressed. The Real is not “an empty blank.” Rather, the Real is beyond and more than anything we can conceive (Hick, *Christian Theology* 66-67). For Hick, trying to use human concepts to describe the Real is like trying to scoop up the oceans with a drinking glass. A drinking glass, like a human concept, is fit for a particular and limited purpose, and thus the nature of the glass is derived from its purpose. However, just as the oceans are too immense for a drinking glass, so too is the Real too much for any human concept.

Arguing further, Hick answers why the Real's existence makes any difference. The difference between postulating the Real and not postulating the Real is the difference between saying that human religious experience is a response to a transcendent reality and human religious experience is mere illusion or projection. If one believes that one of the post-axial faiths is a response to something real rather than an illusion, the parity of salvific transformation and the parity of experience-based justification enjoyed among the great traditions makes it reasonable to postulate the Real. The Real provides a religious explanation of how religious experience can be varied in its expressions across cultures but similar in fostering personal transformation despite cultural differences. Without postulating the Real as the common transcendent reality to which the post-axial faiths are responses, we are left with an incoherent set of conflicting absolutisms whereby each religious tradition is claiming superiority in the face of the salvific and epistemic parity among them.

Once again, there seems to be an underlying issue that is implicated by Phil's objections that Hick's response does not adequately engage, if at all. Despite all the back and forth about how the Real is or is not, should or should not be, beyond description, there is quite a bit Hick actually does say substantively about the Real, whether he would acknowledge it or not. In the first place, Hick holds that the Real is singular rather than plural. Although he states that there is no reason *a priori* to deny that the Real is a plurality, he offers arguments to support his view of singularity and why it is more reasonable to adopt a singular view of the Real. We will return to consider this issue later in more detail. Suffice it to say at this juncture that Hick believes the Real is one rather than many; otherwise, he would not argue for it.

The second substantive claim, as we have seen, is Hick's description of the Real as the "source and ground of everything." A third substantive claim is that not only is the Real the

source and ground of everything, it is “a single ultimate ground of all human salvific transformation.” Fourthly, Hick tells us that the Real is universally present: “I am proposing that the universal presence of the Real, in which ‘we live and move and have our being,’ generates within certain exceptionally open and sensitive individuals, an unconscious awareness of an aspect or aspects of its meaning for our human existence” (*Interpretation* 169). And how does the Real “generate unconscious awareness of meaning” (a fifth substantive claim)? By, sixthly, “impinging” on our consciousness so that we undergo the human religious experiences by concepts such as numinous, holy, awesome, terrible, etc. (*Christian Theology* 64). Therefore, it is probably becomes misleading to say that John Hick’s understanding of ultimate reality is of something entirely ineffable and beyond the human conceptual repertoire. The so called Real *an sich* is the singular (as opposed to plural) reality that is the source and ground of everything, that is universally (as opposed to locally) present, generating awareness of religious meaning, impinging upon human consciousness as the singular ultimate source of human salvific transformation. These six characterizations clearly amount to substantive or descriptive claims about the Real.

So far as I can determine, Hick has not replied to a criticism of the laundry list variety just articulated. A possible response would be for him to assert that the foregoing are examples of merely formal statements. For example, Hick acknowledges that, as a matter of pure logic, one is stating something about the Real by stating that the Real is that about what nothing can be stated. But Hick considers such a statement to be merely “a logical triviality with no significant consequences” (*Christian Theology* 59) However, it would be difficult to claim that what Hick has himself said in reference to the Real, as set forth in the six claims listed above, amounts to mere logical triviality. In this vein, Phillip L. Quinn has likewise shown that Hick’s is unable to

avoid making substantive claims about the Real, and that those claims rise above mere logical formality. Quinn's criticism focuses on Hick's view of the Real as singular rather than plural, as well as the Real's causal contribution to religious experience:

Hick's claim that the Real *an sich* cannot be said to be one or many seems to be inconsistent with his insistence that we can, for reasons of simplicity, say that it is not a plurality, whether orderly, feuding or unrelated. In addition, the claim that the Real *an sich* is a single thing and not a plurality, a one and not many, appears to be not a purely formal statement. . . . If theoretical considerations can justify a substantive claim about the noumenal realm in this instance, what if anything is to prevent them from doing so in other cases? . . . Hick claims that the Real *an sich* provides informational input into the human mind and that we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of this information that its influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of human experiences. Presumably, the pluralistic hypothesis, when understood in terms of the construct model, requires that these be claims to literal truth. . . they are substantive claims, albeit fairly abstract ones, and hence the statements making them appear to be not purely formal (Quinn 152).

Clearly, there is quite a difference between the stating that the Real is that about which nothing can be said, and stating that the Real is singular rather than plural. The latter statement is not a merely formal statement deduced from the meaning of ineffability. It is a description of what the Real is actually like. Furthermore, because the Real is not purely passive in the production of experiences, its active role in this regard implies further statements about what the Real is, rather than what the Real is not. I find Quinn's criticisms to be sound ones.

It would thus appear that the idea of the noumenal and ineffable Real *an sich* that Hick has developed in his pluralism has left him open to two different kinds of criticism which in combination suggest that he is trying to eat his cake and have it. On the one hand, Hick's insistence that the Real is beyond human concepts provokes the objection that the Real is a vacuous term with no import. This is a serious charge to make about the central idea of a grand theory that purports to explain the relationship between post-axial religions. On the other hand, the same insistence that the Real is beyond concepts is assailable because it does not square with

the numerous substantive or descriptive claims that Hick makes about the Real. This tension between supposed ineffability and substantive claims raises the specter of theoretical incoherence, which is likewise a serious charge against Hick's grand-scale theory. As things stand, Hick's ontology places him between a rock and a hard place – between vacuity and incoherence – which might be avoided if he did not believe in such a radical discontinuity between ultimate reality and the experiential realm.

In Hick's thought, the ontological question of how a theory of ultimate reality should be formulated relates rather closely with soteriological concerns. Along these lines, it is useful to recall two of Hick's views to which we have previously alluded. One is Hick's thesis that for the sake of theoretical simplicity, the Real should be considered singular rather than plural. The second view is Hick's claim that neither goodness nor its analogues can be attributed to the Real in itself. In addressing these topics we transition from what has so far been in this chapter a predominantly metaphysical discussion to the related but distinct topic of soteriology that plays so important a role in Hick's pluralism.

Hick's rationale for referring to the Real as singular was presented in the previous chapter. Hick's defense against criticisms of the idea of the Real as singular appears in the dialogue with Phil. Through Phil, Hick sets forth the charge by certain critics that Hick is committing the logical fallacy of deducing a singular ineffable reality from the fact that references to a singular ineffable reality appear in the various sacred texts of the post-axial religions. Hick replies that his critics are incorrect in attributing such an argument to him, and then he clarifies his position:

My reason to assume that the different world religions are referring, through their specific Gods and Absolutes, to the same ultimate Reality is the striking similarity of the transformed human state described within the different traditions as saved, redeemed, enlightened, wise, awakened, liberated. This similarity strongly

suggests a common source of salvific transformation. So it seems to me that the most reasonable hypothesis is that of a single ultimate ground of all human salvific transformation, rather than a plurality of such grounds (*Christian Theology* 69).

The question that arises, however, is whether Hick's continual emphasis on religion as personal transformation evidenced by moral fruits, and the supposed salvific parity of the great religions, gives us reason to question the tenability of his theoretical model. What follows will show that it does.

Hick undeniably places great emphasis, on the supposed similarity of salvific transformation across religious traditions. Indeed, the rough equality that supposedly exists among post-axial religions as contexts of personal transformation is an idea that is crucial and fundamental to Hick's entire project. As we have seen, Hick maintains that the function of post-axial religion is to provide a context for salvific transformation, which consists in a shift from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. In light of this emphasis, it is understandable to ask, as Phil did earlier, why the concept of goodness of some kind doesn't apply in some way to the Real. (Recall that Phil in fact argues that the concept of goodness, or something like it, must apply to the Real.) Query: is it not a problem for Hick to maintain both (1) that the Real is beyond concepts, including goodness or its analogues, *and* (2) that the Real is "a common source of salvific transformation," as well as "a single ultimate ground of all human salvific transformation"? The first of these two propositions suggests a kind of discontinuity between the noumenal Real and human experience. The second proposition, by contrast, suggests a kind of continuity. Let us now take up the issue of discontinuity.

Brad Seeman has argued that Hick's postulation of the indescribable Real *an sich* creates a serious problem of "onto-ethical discontinuity" in Hick's pluralistic hypothesis" (Seeman 157). An ineffable Real concerning which neither good nor evil can be used as descriptions ultimately

makes it impossible to determine what classifies as an appropriate response to the Real. Seeman explains:

Hick's theory cannot accommodate a noumenal Real with epistemological relevance. Hick needs ontology without epistemological ramifications for his system to work. Thus the noumenal Real is thought to be 'ineffable' and 'ambiguous,' that is, epistemologically neutered. Hick's noumenal Real is rendered completely passive and non-communicative. There is nothing in this noumenal Real to resist human constructions, thus allowing any phenomenal construction equal claim *prima facie* to be responding authentically to the Real. Of course, the utter impotence of the noumenal Real to constrain human phenomenal constructions immediately raises a difficulty . . . What reason do we have to think that phenomenal personae or impersonae that are good are more closely representative of the noumenal Real than those that are evil? . . . The trick is to rule out the phenomenal projections of Jim Jones and David Koresh as inauthentic or inappropriate responses to the noumenal Real, while saying nothing substantive about the noumenal Real, like, 'The Real is good (Seeman 157).

Seeman goes on to conclude that Hick does not provide a satisfactory answer for why one response to the Real is more appropriate than another. Hick's attempt to provide an answer consists of offering soteriological and ethical criteria. Soteriologically, a religious tradition is an appropriate response to the Real is appropriate if it produces saints. Ethically, a religion responds to the Real is appropriately as evidenced by love and compassion. But Seeman asks "again, why think that this is the case, if one can make no ontological affirmations about the noumenal Real"(Seeman, 167). Further, as Seeman points out, Hick's appeal to soteriological and ethical criteria ensnare him in a circular argument.

To better illustrate and discuss the circularity in Hick's reasoning to which Seeman refers, it is well to consider the point in one of the dialogues when Phil asks how it is that Hick knows that love and compassion are appropriate responses to the Real. Hick responds by stating "Because all of the great traditions teach this, and I am taking them to be authentic responses to the Real" (*Christian Theology* 77). Phil responds that Hick's reasoning is circular: "You start with the assumption that these various traditions are authentic responses to the Real, and then

you use their moral teachings as the criterion by which to judge that they *are* authentic responses to the Real!” Hick acknowledges that his argument is circular, but he adds that there is no non-circular way to establish so fundamental a proposition. Hick draws an analogy between his claim that love and compassion are appropriate responses to the Real and the criteria by which people distinguish between veridical sense perceptions and hallucinations (*Christian Theology* 79). In the final analysis, any attempt to establish the veracity of one sense perception will involve an appeal to another sense perception. Circularity is unavoidable. Likewise, for those who have faith that post-axial religions are veridical responses to a transcendent reality, distinguishing appropriate responses to that transcendent reality from inappropriate responses involves an appeal to ethical criteria. That criteria assumes that goodness is as indicative of true religion as genuine sense perception is indicative of empirical truth.

While it might be true that ultimate or first principles cannot be established by appeal to a higher ground, I do not believe that Hick resolves the issue of onto-ethical discontinuity by appealing to first principles and then admitting that the appeal is circular. To say that the great religions all teach love and compassion, and therefore any religion that does not teach love and compassion is not a true religion, tells us only that there is moral consensus among the great traditions. It tells us nothing about the nature of Hick’s soteriological alignment, i.e. what it means to be an appropriate response to the Real. Soteriological alignment refers to a relationship between a transcendent reality and a human religious tradition, a relationship characterized by an orientation to that transcendent reality that is distinguishable from an orientation of an inferior quality. But if we cannot know or say anything about the Reality to which something is rightly or wrongly oriented, how can we know whether or not we are indeed rightly or wrongly oriented? To say that religion x is aligned with the ineffable Real is a bit like saying that I am aligned with

the empty and invisible space in an empty room. If there are no observable objects in the space that fills the room that enable me to speak meaningfully as to whether or not I am aligned with anything, I have no idea what it means to be properly aligned. Likewise, if there are no concepts applicable to the Real so that I can determine if my actions and attitudes accord with the nature of the Real or what the Real prescribes, how can I know anything about how I stand in relation to the Real?

If Hick were to respond that we can determine how we stand in relation to the Real because consensus among the diverse religions shows that we are soteriologically aligned with ultimate reality insofar as we are living morally or compassionately, then it must be borne in mind that consensus itself is a two-edged sword. Specifically, despite Hick's insistence that the Real *an sich* is beyond the concepts of good and evil, Hick has stated quite the opposite about the consensus of the great religions on this point. Hick observes: "This conviction of the great traditions that the eternal and overarching reality is good, and that the outcome of the human story will therefore be good, is an assurance of not merely a private, but of a universal fulfillment" (*Interpretation* 61). The problem Hick has, therefore, goes beyond circular reasoning. The problem, in my judgment, is this: Hick says the consensus of the great religions is that ultimate reality is good. Hick also says that the consensus of the great traditions is that love and compassion are appropriate responses to ultimate reality. However, Hick adopts the consensus on love and compassion as his reason for concluding that love and compassion are appropriate responses to the Real, but he denies that the ultimate reality can be called good, even though the consensus of the great traditions is that ultimate reality is good. On what rational basis does Hick appeal to consensus in one instance and ignore it in the other instance? Despite his own acknowledgement of the universal religious teaching of the goodness of ultimate reality, Hick

resorts to metaphor and his familiar dichotomy between the noumenal and the phenomenal to explain away the post-axial consensus on transcendent goodness:

I do not describe the Real *in itself* as good, benign or gracious. But in relation to us – that is, in terms of the difference it makes to us – it is good as the ground of the transformed state which is our highest good. So the sense in which the Real is good, benign, gracious is analogous to that in which the sun is, from our point of view, good, friendly, life-giving. (Poets have spoken, for example, of the ‘blessed sun himself’ and how ‘the sun shines sweetly on’.) The life-giving warmth of the sun is the ground, or the *sine qua non*, of our existence and our flourishing. Likewise the Real is the necessary condition of our existence and our highest good. It is in this sense that we can speak of the Real as being, in relation to us, good, benign, gracious. But when we describe the Real in itself in these terms we are speaking mythologically rather than literally (*Christian Theology* 63).

The same arbitrariness by which Hick adopts religious consensus on love and compassion but does not adopt religious consensus on the goodness of ultimate reality can be used to support the inverse of Hick’s position. One could, for example, maintain that ultimate reality is literally good or benign because that is what all the great religions teach. Then one could turn around and say that love and compassion should not be thought of as authentic responses to ultimate reality because the moral domain is limited or restricted to the relationships between and among human beings and other sentient life. In other words, the goodness of ultimate reality is a kind of goodness that so transcends the natural order that it has no normative import for moral or ethical relations. On this view, to be loving, or compassionate, is good for social and interpersonal harmony, and can foster an appropriate relation to ultimate reality insofar as living in a wholesome way frees one’s attention to think about one’s relation to ultimate reality. But this is to speak of love and compassion as *prerequisites* for an appropriate response to the Real, not as the *fruits* of an appropriate response to the Real.

Thus, we see that while there may be a pardonable circularity in Hick's reasoning about the consensus of ethical criteria regarding human alignment with the Real, there is, in my judgment, an unjustified arbitrariness in Hick's use of post-axial consensus. Hick remains wedded to the idea of the Real as beyond all categories, including the categories of good and evil. This insistence on complete ineffability creates the onto-ethical divide of which Brad Seeman speaks. Given Hick's noumenal/phenomenal dichotomy, the only thing he can do to try and account for how love and compassion can be authentic responses to a noumenal Real that is beyond good and evil is appeal to post-axial consensus. However, an appeal to post-axial consensus would also establish that the Real is good because all the post-axial religions, according to Hick, teach that ultimate reality is good. Consistency requires that consensus either be adopted in both instances or disregarded in both instances. Hick is not consistent on this point. Accordingly, our consideration of Hick's views of ethics in relation to the Real has given us occasion to uncover internal inconsistency in Hick's thought.

The problem of Hick's refusal to attribute goodness to ultimate reality can be considered from yet another angle. In chapter three we saw how Hick believes that naturalists such as Marxists and Humanists who reject religion altogether can nevertheless be responding authentically to the universal presence of the Real without being aware of it. "For they may feel and act upon an unconscious awareness of that presence [of the Real] as a responsibility to seek justice or to create peace or to serve their fellow humans in a great variety of ways" (Hick, *Interpretation* xli). It is therefore possible for a person to reject all the divine personae and impersonae, reject any cosmic or overarching scheme of value, and simply do what is good for goodness' sake. Hick acknowledges this view to be a kind of inclusivism, one that he calls an "appropriate inclusivism." If, as Hick says, the Real is "a single ultimate ground of all human

salvific transformation” and there are people like atheists who reject a religious interpretation of life, but who nevertheless respond to the Real by their altruism, then the upshot is that wherever love and compassion are found, the Real must be what accounts for them. But if the Real always accounts for a movement away from self-centeredness – and this seems an unavoidable consequence for Hick – then Hick is even more hard pressed to avoid attributing goodness to the ineffable Real *an sich*, given his understanding of human experience as concept laden and cognitively filtered. In the case of people of religious faith, the cognitive filters by which such persons respond to the noumenal Real are comprised of religious concepts that regard ultimate reality as good, benign, gracious, etc. For a person to hold to those concepts helps explain within Hick’s theory why the person’s response to the noumenal Real takes the form of moral goodness. Consider, for example, Christ’s command “Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” A Christian who embraces this teaching as a divine edict is employing the distinctively religious concept of divine perfection to interpret human existence. For such a Christian, life should be lived in an exemplary manner in accordance with the divine attributes of love, justice, mercy, etc. Thus, using Hick’s terminology, it is possible to account for the fruits in the life of such a Christian in terms of the concept of divine perfection that serves as a cognitive filter by which the Real is mediated and the Christian is soteriologically aligned. But in the case of an atheist, whose cognitive filters are comprised of ideas and concepts that reject and deny goodness or graciousness *as aspects of a transcendent reality*, the Real is not being cognitively filtered through any divine *personae* or *impersonae* of supreme goodness that inspire or motivate love and compassion.

Therefore, query: If the Real is not good in itself but is the source of all salvific transformation, how can Hick explain atheists’ soteriological alignment with the Real? Recall

that for Hick, all human experience is constituted by and through concepts that filter and order the stuff that seeps into consciousness from the noumenal environment. Given Hick's soteriological criteria, a religion's salvific efficacy owes to the fact that its concepts that filter the Real create contexts in which the faithful can become Reality centered as opposed to self-centered. But if the atheist devoted to peace or justice lacks the cognitive filters (religious concepts) that make for religious alignment with the Real, then it would seem to be the case that the Real as the ultimate source of salvific transformation is bringing about goodness in atheists more directly i.e. without cognitive filters whereby the Real is experienced as good. For the Real to have such a power of influence for good without somehow being good in itself, as Hick holds, simply makes no sense. At bottom, Hick's morally virtuous atheist and the religious person living out salvation have two things in common. One is that the Real is present to them both. The other is that they are each appropriately responding to the Real, one consciously and the other, unconsciously. To account for these moral similarities in terms of a soteriological criteria of salvific religion that is inclusive of atheists becomes mystifying if one rejects the idea that the Real is good in itself.

Thus far we have been focusing on Hick's soteriological criteria in terms of whether it coheres with Hick's theory of the ineffable Real *an sich*. There are those who take issue with Hick's soteriological criteria quite apart from its relationship to Hick's metaphysical views. In this vein, the preceding discussion of atheism serves as a point of departure. If the function of post-axial religion is to bring about transformative change for the better in people, and the truth of a religion is evinced by whether it performs this function according to its fruits, then it follows that if thoroughgoing atheists can boast of the same fruits, we face a serious issue of whether we can ever determine whether post-axial religion is performing its function. This is a question that

Schubert Ogden would likely press very hard. Ogden is skeptical that soteriological or ethical criteria can be used to establish the truth of any religion. Ogden's is a critique that assails the tenability of religious pluralism itself and includes argument against Hick's view that religious pluralism is supported by the alleged parity among the post-axial religions in producing moral fruits. Ogden argues that Hick's underlying assumption that the fruits of a religion evince the presence of religious faith inheres a logical fallacy. Doing the good that faith requires, Ogden contends, does not entail that the good that is done occurs because of religious faith rather than because of something else. Although personal transformation carries with it the expectation that good fruit will be borne as a result, this transformation "takes place within one's innermost self-understanding, and therefore, can never be either simply identified by its fruits or validly inferred from them, however validly they can be inferred from it" (Ogden 68).

The flaw in Hick's reasoning that Ogden apparently has in mind can be expressed as the familiar form of invalid argument that logicians refer to as affirming the consequent. That fallacy, expressed informally, takes the following form: "If A is the case, then B follows from it. B has occurred. Therefore, A is the case." Expressed as a concrete example, this fallacy would occur if one were to reason that if it is raining outside, then the ground is wet. Because the ground is wet, it is therefore raining outside. This argument is does not use a valid logical inference because from the fact that the ground outside is wet, it does not follow necessarily that rain caused the wetness. The sprinkler system could have caused it. Similarly, Hick's reasoning involves the fallacy of affirming the consequent and takes a form that can be expressed thusly: "If transformative religious faith is present, then moral fruits will result. Moral fruits are present. Therefore, transformative religious faith is present." However, just as the sprinkler system can account for the wet ground, the desire to be moral for reasons that have nothing to do with

religious faith can account for moral fruits. Accordingly, Ogden deems it unsound for Hick, or any other pluralist, to argue that more than one religion is true based upon the supposed parity of moral goodness found among the adherents within the different religious traditions. As Ogden observes,

Granted that individual and social changes can indeed be observed to occur in the context of a specific religion, how does one rule out the possibility that changes thus associated with the religion have nonetheless occurred independently of it or have been effected less because of it than in spite of it? One of the striking things to me about the behavior of human beings in extreme situations is that their specific religious or philosophical affiliations make relatively little difference. During the Nazi time in Germany, for instance, the resistance against Hitler included persons of the most diverse religious and philosophical persuasions, even as the same was true of those who passively supported his regime or actively collaborated with it. I submit that the case is not likely to be different in other more or less similar situations familiar to all of us. But, then, what force can there be in arguing for the truth of a specific religion from changes occurring either in individuals or societies in its particular context? (Ogden 68).

We can thus see that Ogden's criticism relates to the issues associated with Hick's inclusivism. It is always possible that something other than faith is working in an individual to account for what we would call his or her fruits, especially in the case of the justice-seeking atheists whom Hick claims are responding to the Real in an unconscious way. If this is so, Ogden's rhetorical question can be asked in a slightly different way: What force is there in arguing for the truth of post-axial religions from their moral fruits if atheists can likewise boast of their own virtuousness?

Hick might respond that his view that moral fruits evince salvation does not involve deductive reasoning. That is to say, Hick does not argue that moral fruits prove salvation in the sense that to bear fruits would entail the presence of salvific faith. Rather, the soteriological and ethical criteria are abductive measures. We can infer the likelihood that salvific truth is present in a religion whenever we find saints in the same sense that a doctor can infer the existence of a

disease by symptoms. Some symptoms can accompany different diseases, but abductive conclusions that someone is suffering from a particular disease based on particular symptoms can still be justified. Therefore, Hick's criteria for salvific transformation are empirical rather than logical. Hick states "the only way in which we are able to observe this salvific reorientation is in its effects in human life, which thus constitute our criterion for assessing, insofar as we can and need to, the religious authenticity of both individuals and historical traditions" (*Exclusivism Versus Pluralism* 42:210).

Kevin Meeker has argued that because Hick's criteria are empirical, it can be shown that Hick's pluralism is undercut by his own criteria (Meeker 200).

For although Hick says that the major world religions view altruism as constitutive of salvation/liberation, this is an *empirical* question and it could turn out that many religions are not so altruistic-centric. In such a situation, Hick could either stick to his ethical criterion and admit that not all of the major religions measure up, which undermines his pluralism, or he can reject his 'self-evident' criterion and thus have no resources to support his rejection of 'selfish religions.' That is, his pluralistic commitment to the salvific efficacy of the major world religions is settled while his appeal to a self-evident moral principle requires him to be open as to what religions really are salvifically efficacious (Meeker 200).

Meeker proceeds to cite examples of religious teaching that do not comport with the idea that salvation is constituted by altruism. For instance, Meeker refers to Buddhism as having no teaching that altruistic selflessness is sufficient for enlightenment. Another example Meeker uses is from the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita* where Sri Krishna proclaims that enlightenment can be found through two different paths, the contemplative path of knowledge or the active path of selfless action (Meeker 201). This pronouncement, Meeker argues, shows that Sri Krishna believes selfless action is not necessary for enlightenment. Meeker asserts that such evidence undercuts Hick's claim of altruism as central to salvific transformation.

Furthermore, Meeker accuses Hick of trying to solve the problems posed by the evidence in an arbitrary way. For example, Hick acknowledges that forms of Buddhism can be construed as elitist because within Zen Buddhism the full *satori* experience is only attained by only a few thousand in each generation, and in Theravada Buddhism the status of an *arhat* is enjoyed by even less. Nevertheless, Hick argues that such a construal of Buddhism cannot be true to its original normative teachings because “[i]n the course of twenty-five centuries, Buddhism has imparted a positive meaning and purpose in life to hundreds of millions of people” (*Interpretation* 185). In reaction, Meeker asserts the following:

Hick offers no textual or historical support for his claims. He merely asserts that such an elitist interpretation of Buddhism cannot account for its status a ‘great world religion’. But this assertion falls woefully short of supporting the strong modal claim that the elitist interpretation ‘cannot’ be correct. Hick here simply seems to be begging the question. When the possibility that he must exclude a major world religion based on his ethical criterion arises, he simply imposes his ethical understanding on that tradition in a way that effectively masks the tension between his criterion and his pluralism (Meeker 201).

Hick’s response to Meeker is to accuse Meeker of attacking a straw man. Meeker’s criticism of Hick hinges on the proposition that Hick sees altruism as constitutive of salvation. Hick denies that he conceives of salvation in such terms. Hick asserts that nowhere has he ever suggested that altruistic behavior constitutes salvation/liberation or that altruism is sufficient for enlightenment in Buddhism. For Meeker to accuse Hick of equating altruism with salvation “is a major misunderstanding because it omits the all-important dimension of transcendence. My proposed definition of salvation is the transformation of human life from self-centeredness to a new orientation, centered in the divine reality” (Hick, *Exclusivism Versus Pluralism* 42:210). Hick clarifies his position on altruism and salvation in response to Meeker thusly: “Salvation/liberation consists in a profound reorientation centered in the Ultimate, the Real, and

altruistic behavior is its natural fruit and an observable sign of it” (Hick, *Exclusivism Versus Pluralism* 42:212).

Hick is correct to point out that Meeker has misrepresented Hick’s express views on what constitutes salvation. However, Meeker’s criticism would have been well founded if he presented it in the context of Hick’s inclusivism. In this connection, it is very fair to question whether Hick ultimately reduces salvation to ethics. In the course of Hick’s response to Meeker, Hick states “The essence of religion is a positive response to the Real, Ultimate Reality, the Transcendent, and this shows itself in a transformed life embodying love and compassion for others – this occurring, needless to say, in many stages and degrees” (Hick, *Exclusivism versus Pluralism* 42:210). Consider this statement in connection with Hick’s claim discussed earlier that people who expressly reject belief in the transcendent can and do respond positively to the Real. Clearly, such atheists are living out the “essence of religion” as Hick defines it. How is it that atheists can be enjoying salvation through their positive response to the Real while at the same time falling short of a profound reorientation centered in the Ultimate? The answer must be, if Hick’s theory is going to have coherence on this point, that atheists are enjoying “a profound reorientation centered in the Real” despite their refusal to embrace a transcendent reality. What, therefore, can the atheist’s unconscious reorientation centered in the Real consist in other than altruistic behavior? In Hickean terms, the religious devotee consciously and voluntarily embraces his or her particular divine *personae* or *impersonae* as the intentional object of his or her faith. This is the centering in the Real from which the “fruits of the spirit” should spring forth in the life of the religious believer. But the atheist has no intentional object of transcendent reference to center upon. The only reason that Hick gives for claiming the altruistic atheist is responding to the Real is the altruism itself. Belief in the transcendent is not required, none of the divine

personae or *impersonae* ultimately make any difference. If altruism is all that is necessary for responding to the Real, then either Hick is reducing religion to ethics or the onus of proof is on Hick to explain or to show otherwise.

The problematic collision between Hick's inclusivism and his soteriological criteria just discussed is the last of the difficulties plaguing Hick's pluralism that this chapter will address. This problem, like the others covered in this chapter, stems ultimately from the same fundamental inconsistency as many, if not all, of the flaws uncovered in this chapter. In a nutshell, the problem with Hick's pluralism that I have focused on is that he is attempting to ground it in a transcendent notion, the Real *an sich*, that Hick cannot, or at least does not, develop throughout his thought with sufficient consistency. In the case of the tension between Hick's inclusivism and his ethical or soteriological criteria, the inconsistency is that the transcendent dimension of Hickean salvation that Hick claims as essential, and accuses Meeker of ignoring, becomes non-essential in the salvation of atheists. Hick urges that he does not equate salvation with ethics because salvation involves a centering in the Real. However, Hick's inclusivism does not provide any intelligible account for how atheists become centered in transcendent reality while simultaneously denying its existence. This is but one of a number of examples of Hick's inconsistency.

Hick's ineffable Real poses problems for his soteriology and results in inconsistency in other ways. As we have seen, Hick claims that goodness cannot be attributed to the Real. This creates the problem of explaining why altruism is an appropriate response to the Real while selfishness is not. Consequently, Hick appeals to a supposed post-axial consensus to solve the problem: altruism is the appropriate response to the Real because that is what all the post-axial religions teach. However, this maneuver ensnares Hick in another logical inconsistency. Hick

observes that the great religions all subscribe to the goodness of ultimate reality. Yet Hick denies that any concept, including goodness, can be attributed to ultimate reality. Thus, Hick adopts post-axial consensus in one context and ignores it in another without any indication of any relevant differences in the two contexts that would justify Hick's selectiveness.

Another example concerns how Hick postulates the Real as the noumenal reality about which nothing can be literally stated. Yet, despite Hick's insistence of ineffability, he makes claims regarding the Real that are clearly substantive, thus attributing the Real, expressly or by implication, identifiable attributes. Hick tells us that the Real is both the source and ground of everything and the ultimate ground of all human salvific transformation. Hick also speaks of the Real as universally present. However, it is not necessary that a transcendent reality be universally present. It is conceivable that a reality can transcend the natural order or the space-time continuum and be non-universal. An angelic being, for example, has been conceived as outside of space and time, dwelling in eternity, but without universal presence. Thus, when Hick speaks of the Real as universally present, he is attributing one quality to it rather than another, a move that Hick claims is impermissible. We also see Hick use active verbs in reference to the Real. The Real "impinges" and "generates" Thus, the Real must be an active transcendent reality rather than a passive one. Again, these are attributes that the logic of Hick's noumenal/phenomenal distinction and his insistence on ineffability would seem to prohibit.

Finally, if we adopt Jung H. Lee's analysis, it would also appear that Hick is inconsistent in the application of this principle of global interpretation, which is also due to Hick's ontology. Hick argues that the aims of a comprehensive theory of religious pluralism dictate that the Real should be considered ineffable because to apply one divine attribute to the Real would require that we apply all divine attributes to the Real and this would be incoherent. However, the

substantive claims that Hick makes about the Real are radically at odds with the claims of Soto Zen. When Hick's various substantive claims are held out in the light of day, it is clear that Hick conceives of the Real as an abiding reality; whereas ultimate reality as conceived in Soto Zen is non-abiding. Thus, Hick has excluded the Soto Zen conception of ultimate Reality, and has thereby breached his own principle of global interpretation.

In light of the deep and numerous problems revealed in the foregoing discussion, I conclude that Hick's theory of religious pluralism lacks sufficient coherence to serve as a viable meta-theory of religious diversity. It might be the case that Hick's theory can be reformulated to be more coherent and still remain materially similar to Hick's original work. That would remain to be seen. It might be that some of Hick's insights can be salvaged and incorporated into a different theory that proves more viable. It could also be the case that other theories of religious pluralism dramatically different from Hick's can fare better. But to pursue such questions with any degree of seriousness is obviously beyond the scope of this manuscript. What I intend to do in the final chapter is to offer some reflections and some suggestions for dealing with the problem of religious diversity.

CHAPTER FIVE

Suggesting a Different Approach

In this chapter, I am going to contrast Hick's approach to religious diversity with the rudiments of an approach that I want to outline as a potentially better alternative. The alternative that I will suggest draws upon some specific insights from John Cobb and the general definition of religion offered by William James. I cannot undertake a thorough synthesis or develop a systematic view in the space that remains. All I want to do is outline a suggestion for further reflection and to offer some reasons for my suggestion.

In his seminal essay, "Beyond Pluralism," Cobb has argued that the problem with many contemporary forms of religious pluralism is that they presuppose that there is an essence to religion. Cobb takes exception to this view: "There is no such thing as religion. There are only traditions, movements, communities, people, beliefs, that have features that are associated by many people with what they mean by religion" (Cobb 83). In Cobb's view, religious diversity cannot be distilled of an essential common denominator and brought together in a unified theory. No religious tradition can be understood as an exemplification or manifestation of a common core, whether it be metaphysical, soteriological or ethical. Cobb holds that although the familiar family resemblance concept is useful for relating the religious world-views to one another, the sheer diversity among religious traditions defy claims to an underlying unity. Instead, Cobb calls for what he calls a more fundamental pluralism.

I see no a priori reason to assume that religion has an essence or that the great religious traditions are well understood as religions, that is traditions for which being religious is the central goal. I certainly see no empirical evidence in favor of this view. I see only scholarly habit and the power of language to mislead. I

call for a pluralism that allows each religious tradition to define its own nature and purposes and the role of religious elements within it. (Cobb 84).

Cobb's pluralism is an unconventional kind of pluralism: instead of asserting an underlying or overarching unity to religious traditions, Cobb affirms the world religious situation as irreducibly and fundamentally diverse.

The more conventional kind of pluralism to which Cobb's view stands in contrast is exemplified in the definition offered by Peter Byrne. Byrne provides a general description of religious pluralism that conveys its fundamental ideas rather succinctly. Byrne states that pluralism can be defined in terms of three basic tenets:

(1) All major religious traditions are equal in respect of making common reference to a single transcendent, sacred reality. (2) All major traditions are likewise equal in respect of offering some means or other to human salvation. (3) All traditions are to be seen as containing revisable, limited accounts of the nature of the sacred: none is certain enough in its particular dogmatic formulations to provide the norm for interpreting the others (Byrne 12)

There are two important ways that that Cobb differs from Hick in terms of Byrne's definition. First, Cobb's pluralism eschews common reference to a single reality. If Cobb believed in such a common reference, then he would have to abandon his view that religion had no essence. Second, with regard to the idea of equal salvific efficacy contained in proposition two of Byrne's definition, Cobb distinguishes himself from the conventional fold in a nuanced way. Referring to the question of whether the religious traditions are roughly equal in achieving salvific success, Cobb states:

the requisite approach to an answer to this question is much more complex than it is for those who assume that all religions have a common essence or purpose just because they are religions. The issue, in my view, is not whether they all accomplish the same goal equally well – however the goal may be defined. It is first of all whether their diverse goals are equally well- realized (Cobb 83)

Finally, regarding Byrne's third proposition about the uncertainty of dogmatic formulations, Cobb seems to be in general accord with the idea that no religious tradition has grounds to lay claim to having the last word on the subject. This will be discussed further as our discussion proceeds.

Viewing the world religious situation from the standpoint of fundamental diversity rather than underlying unity leads Cobb to outline his own understanding in a way that differs from Byrne's definition of pluralism in both content and emphasis. Cobb identifies four features "that characterize all the traditions to the extent that they acknowledge the pluralistic situation in which all are plunged today" (Cobb 86) Cobb summarizes these feature as follows: First, all religious traditions "affirm the universal value of their insights and affirmations." Accordingly, sheer conceptual relativism is not a tenable option for a proper understanding of religious diversity. Second, most of the great traditions teach humility regarding the human ability to attain depth and fullness of understanding regarding the nature of reality. "Hence, they discourage the tendency, present in all, to identify ideas that are now possessed and controlled with final expression of all important truth." Third, mutual appreciation among religious traditions becomes possible the more contact they have among themselves and the more they become understanding of one another. An understanding of one's own tradition becomes possible which is not obtainable if the search for understanding does not venture outside that same tradition. Mutual enrichment is the fruit of genuine openness. Fourth, as interaction among religious traditions improves and the traditions assimilate the insights of one another the "universal relevance of their own insights is vindicated as other religions acknowledge their value. The comprehensiveness and human adequacy of their traditions is enlarged" (Cobb 87). Accordingly, the kind of pluralism that Cobb espouses calls for and presupposes willingness to

dialogue and openness to mutual transformation. “In many instances, precisely *as* a believer, one is open to learn from others, believing that the fullness of wisdom goes beyond what any tradition already possesses” (Cobb 86). Cobb concludes by identifying the one norm that he finds applicable to the contemporary pluralistic situation that those who are committed to dialogue find themselves in. That norm is “the ability of a tradition in faithfulness to its past to be enriched and transformed in its interaction with other traditions.” (Cobb 92)

Before illustrating the differences between Hick and Cobb, it is worth mentioning how they are compatible. Although I have showed that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis with the noumenal Real as its lynchpin to be untenable in a number of ways, Hick has, in my opinion, contributed significantly to the diversity discussion by his emphasis on a basic principle. Acknowledging his own Christian experience as a rational justification for faith, Hick observes: “I then notice that there are other great world religions likewise reporting their own religious experience, the cognitive character of which is supported in the same way. And so I have to extend to them the same principle that religious experience constitutes a valid basis for religious belief” (*Christian Theology* 50). The appeal of this view consists in its basic fairness and internal consistency. If I claim to grasp religious truth, and my basis for that claim is that I have experiences of such a compelling quality that I am both rationally justified in my claim and subjectively impelled to hold to the concomitant beliefs that arise within me, then something important follows regarding the claims of others. I must, both in fairness and in deference to my own principle of justification, credit the claims of others who claim to grasp a religious truth on a substantially similar experiential basis, even if their religious claims are different and in conflict from my own. Stated negatively, this principle means that I cannot fairly and rationally deny *a priori* the truth of a religious claim that is experientially based simply because the claim is

different from my own. Hick's principle is a kind of "golden rule" for the justification of religious belief. Hick's view is thus compatible with the spirit of humility concerning matters of truth that Cobb identifies as the second proposition of the fundamental pluralism that he calls for. There is no room for hubris where epistemic equality before the unseen is acknowledged and felt.

In any event, significant differences between Cobb's and Hick's approaches to religious diversity undoubtedly exist. The unity in diversity that Cobb prescribes is not a postulated abstraction like Hick's Real *an sich*, but a concrete and lived unity of purpose through dialogue. If Cobb has a transcendent idea in terms of which the religious traditions should be understood, it is wisdom. The fullness of wisdom transcends any one particular tradition, and that is why willingness to dialogue and the openness to be transformed by it is justified. There is thus a basic contrast of interpretation between Hick and Cobb. Hick discerns an epistemic and soteriological parity among the post-axial faiths that points to a metaphysical unity in the noumenal realm. Cobb finds that the lack of any common core or essence in which all religious traditions share imposes an ineluctable diversity that precludes a grand theory. Hick sees the pluralistic situation as one where the beliefs of the post-axial religions are equally supported by both religious experiences of equal epistemic value and by the fruits of religious devotion of roughly equal soteriological value. Given this perceived equality, Hick feels it necessary to reconcile conflicting truth claims by postulating the ineffable Real *an sich*, in whose ineffability the literal assertions of the diverse truth claims are all equally submerged and silenced. Cobb, on the other hand, allows the diversity to flourish untouched by theoretical constructs that would try to unify the religions into a comprehensive scheme. Furthermore, Cobb does not view rough equality of

success among the religious traditions as a philosophical tenet. Rather, the idea of rough equality has a practical value as a starting point. Cobb explains:

[O]n the whole, religious traditions fare relatively well based on the norms to which they themselves are committed. Generally, by its own norms, each succeeds better than do any of the others. No doubt some do better than others even measured by their own norms, and within all of them there are massive failures as well as successes. Whether rough equality is a useful generalization is hard to say, but as people from different traditions meet, it is a good assumption with which to begin (Cobb 85)

Clearly, Cobb does not assert a rough salvific equality among religions as evidenced by an alleged parity among them in fostering the common goal of transforming people from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness. Cobb finds no common goal. Nor does Cobb regard any kind of equality of success that religious traditions might have as a justification for seeking an explanation of that success in a postulated transcendent reality, as Hick does through his postulation of the noumenal Real *an sich*, which both explains rough equality of the religions' salvific success and the parity of their epistemic justification.

The question that arises from Hick's vision of epistemic parity that engages him so weightily is what should be done about conflicting truth claims. The reason this is such a vexing question for Hick is that he is committed to the idea of the post-axial faiths as equally true. He has arrived at this commitment based on an understanding that religion essentially means edified self-transformation in relation to transcendent reality. Since self-transformation for the good seems to occur equally among the great traditions, their truth is equally evidenced. Conflicting claims about the nature of reality become matters of secondary importance given the essentially soteriological function of post-axial religion. By postulating the ineffable Real *an sich* as the ultimate reality, Hick effectively dispenses with conflicting truth claims of the great religions by stripping them of any descriptive reference to ultimate reality, contrary to the intent of the

religious devotees making the claims, who consider their claims to be literal or analogical references. Such is Hick's solution to the problem of conflicting truth claims.

As I have shown earlier, Hick's solution to conflicting truth claims leads to all kinds of conflicting ideas within his own theory and those inconsistencies render his pluralistic hypothesis untenable. The problem that becomes clearer in light of Cobb's approach is that Hick's purported solution oversimplifies. Hick asserts that his hypothesis is most reasonable because it is simple. But it seems to me that appeals to simplicity often suffer from being too simplistic. The human mind often seems to be bent on finding solutions to problems by looking for what poses the least complexity: a single cause for an event, a single motive for an act, a single source for authority, a single scapegoat for institutional failure. Anyone who has reflected on experience can attest to the potential folly of this human tendency. Simplicity, in and of itself, is not a theoretical virtue or an earmark of truth. The benefit of simplicity is that the more simple an explanation is, the fewer assumptions are built in to the explanation, which would theoretically decrease the margin for error. However, this benefit does not apply in the religious sphere if the subject matter concerns ultimate reality and the central and sometimes conflicting claims of the world religions.

To postulate a single sacred reality as the ultimate ontological and salvific ground of post-axial religious diversity in terms of which that diversity is reconciled and accounted for, involves a number of assumptions. First, believing each great tradition makes reference to the same sacred reality involves assuming that the claims of each religious tradition are sufficiently uniform and adequately understood. Only in this manner can the cognitive relationship of each religion to ultimate reality be correctly ascertained. Second, to posit a single sacred reality to account for religious diversity obligates one to describe what that reality is like. As soon as one offers such a description, the experience of each religious tradition must be shown to square with

it, which involves the two-fold challenge of understanding the diverse experiences within each tradition sufficiently, followed by the separate tasks of relating each diverse body experiences within a tradition to a concept of transcendent reality that is likely to be foreign to it. And, third, lest we forget, the risk of allowing the bias of one's own tradition to unfairly color how one conceives of ultimate reality is yet another challenge that raises the likelihood of mischaracterization and incoherence in a conventional theory of pluralism. These are some of the difficulties with conventional pluralism that make Cobb's alternative approach worth considering. It is not as if Cobb makes no assumptions. Rather, it is that Cobb does not further complicate an already complicated situation by bringing in a meta-theory that offers the promise of elucidating an underlying unity that resolves conflicting truth claims, but instead only generates further complexity and complication.

For Cobb the conflicting truth claims of the great religions is not so preoccupying. Cobb acknowledges that for many religious thinkers the sorting out and adjudicating among conflicting religious claims is crucial. Cobb believes that such an approach is not very productive. Opining that it is unlikely that any of the religious traditions are literally and exactly correct in their central claims, Cobb expounds:

Laying out the conflicting doctrines and developing arguments for and against them is a questionable preoccupation. Instead, it is best to listen to the deep, even ultimate concerns that are being expressed in these diverse statements. Here I am one with those in opposition to whom this paper is written. They, too, seek to go beyond what is said to something deeper. We differ only in that what they find is something common to all the traditions, whereas I believe that what we find is diverse (Cobb 93)

In a forthcoming way, Cobb lays bare his two most critical assumptions:

- (1) My assumption is that alongside all the errors and distortions that can be found in all our traditions there are insights arising from profound thought and experience that are diverse modes of apprehending diverse aspects of the totality of reality. They are true, and their truth can become more apparent and better formulated as they are positively related to one another (Cobb, 94)

- (2) My assumption is that what is positively intended by those who have lived, thought, and felt deeply is likely to be true, whereas their formulations are likely to exclude other truths that should not be excluded (Cobb 93)

There are some important points to be noticed about Cobb's assumptions. The first point to notice is that Cobb's view does not commit one to the belief that the great religious traditions are equally true. Conventional pluralism makes such equality a centerpiece. However, Cobb's approach seems to leave the issue open. Creedal egalitarianism is not required for adopting Cobb's form of so-called pluralism. The only thing that seems to be required is willingness for open and honest dialogue between and among religious traditions. It may be that dialogue leads some people to the view that the great traditions are equally true in some way. But it also may be the case that other people reach a different conclusion. What is more important than the question of equality is the transformation and enrichment of perspective that dialogue can bring.

The second point to make about Cobb's approach is that it excludes absolutism. (This much he certainly has in common with Hick.) A devotee of Christianity, for example, can enter dialogue with other faiths and believe in the uniqueness and great value of his or her tradition. But the same devotee would not be partaking in genuine dialogue by thinking that no truth can be found outside of Christianity, or by thinking every important Christian claim is perfectly formulated and totally accurate. The mutual enrichment that Cobb envisions cannot occur those latter conditions.

The third point to bring out is that Cobb's view of reality is multi-aspectual in its emphasis. Cobb speaks of the diverse religious experiences as diverse modes of gaining insights into diverse aspects of the totality of reality. This is a contrast from the more conventional pluralism outlined by Byrne and exemplified by Hick. The conventional view emphasizes unity,

rather than diversity, as the more salient feature of the totality of reality for understanding the relationship between the great traditions. The two views, in my judgment, do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive. It depends on how they are formulated. The perennial problem of the one and the many can take a number of forms has a number of suggested solutions. Much depends on the context. If the context is interpreting the global religious situation, Cobb's solution is to look at the global situation through the lens of manifold diversity and perhaps allow unity to emerge as a concept at whatever moments within dialogue that its emergence is appropriate. But Cobb does not hold unity up as the controlling principle to which the diverse traditions must conform in some way, especially if such conformity distorts their unique identities.

Basically, I believe Cobb is wise in letting the religious traditions remain diverse and by not resorting to a potentially distorting simplification of them by a single theoretical construct similar to the kind Hick develops as his Real *an sich*. However, to the extent that Cobb would insist that a philosophy of religious diversity must dispense absolutely and altogether with a definition of religion, I believe his emphasis on diversity is too radical. To adopt a limited and tentative definition of religion can be heuristically beneficial if that definition is sufficiently flexible and can accommodate Cobb's diversity thesis. William James provides us with such a definition. James once wrote: "Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James 59). This definition is promising. It offers a starting point for thinking of diversity that neither discounts the metaphysical or soteriological dimensions, nor commits itself to a common essence of transcendental reality or soteriological function that would subsume diversity in a false theoretical simplicity. Furthermore, there is nothing in James' definition that asserts or

implies a supposed equality among religions, but neither does the definition discount the truth or value that any religious tradition might contain. Thus, while Cobb might resist James' definition to the extent that James claims that there is such a thing as religion, I believe James' view jibes with Cobb's insights in a number of ways, as I will show in due course.

Consider first James' definition as it relates to his idea of an unseen order. There are a number of reasons to commend such a concept. It appears to me almost uncontroversial that the ways of life and traditions usually identified as religious, such as the post-axial religions, all contain beliefs and rituals that are directed toward, involve, or presuppose something invisible. The invisible realities that religious faiths concern themselves with vary, but ascribing importance to an invisible domain is what seems to be common to all of them. Second, an "unseen order" is an open-ended notion that invites discussion more than it pronounces a view of what ultimate reality is. An unseen order is inviting because it can accommodate discussion of differing concepts of ultimate reality, as well discussion of the kinds of penultimate and unseen realities that religious traditions claim to exist and that have importance for understanding the traditions. If conflicting truth claims about ultimate reality is an inevitable issue for religious diversity, the concept of unseen order is sufficiently definite to accommodate discussion about conflicting truth claims. Accordingly, if considering the matter from the standpoint of Cobb's emphasis on dialogue, a question with which a dialogue could commence is "Is it fair to say that your tradition somehow concerns itself with an unseen order, and, if so, what is the nature of your unseen order?" Thus, if nothing else, James' general definition of religion can be appropriated as a starting assumption to facilitate Cobb's dialogic approach, similar to the pragmatic move that Cobb recommends of starting dialogue with the assumption that the religious traditions succeed at their tasks equally well.

The belief in the equal truth and equal salvific efficacy of post-axial religions is a cardinal principle of Hick's pluralism and is a core tenet of pluralism in general. I reject it. I find that the claim of equality probably results more out of abhorrence for absolutism and exclusivism than it is borne out by any evidence or compelling reasons. Following Hick, I subscribe to epistemic parity in the justification of religious belief based on religious experience. Hick's "golden rule" of justification of belief that I labeled earlier as such is compelling. However, from the fact that no religion can refute the claims of another on the basis of religious experience, it certainly does not follow that every religion that is justified in its central beliefs is just as true as all the others. The extent to which a religion is comparatively true would depend on some criteria for determining comparative truth that would involve factors such as the number of actually true propositions the religion contains, the relative importance of the subject matter to which the true propositions are addressed, the overall internal coherence of a religion's propositional structure, and more. In the face of such daunting criteria, I think it is perfectly justified to say that one religious tradition might be truer than another, but I simply don't know the answer. Neither does any supposed appeal to the fruits of a religion resolve the issue. If as Hick suggests, there is no evidence to substantiate the claim that one religion is more soteriologically successful than another, then neither is there any evidence to establish that the religions are substantially equal in this regard either. The answer is that we simply don't know, and we probably can't know one way or another. It is perfectly legitimate, as a practical matter, to enter into dialogue on the assumption of parity among the religions, but considerations of practical utility do not establish claims of semantic accuracy. That is because it is perfectly possible for spiritual devotion within a religious tradition to enhance the edifying quality of one's life even though the central beliefs of that religion contain more error than accuracy. For one such as myself, who rejects the

pluralist thesis of equal truth among religions, but who, along with Cobb is inclined to believe that wisdom and goodness transcend all the human religious traditions so that no tradition can claim a monopoly, James' definition of religion is appealing. The idea of an unseen order can accommodate the view that whatever transcends the ordinary empirical world is multi-faceted and deeply or infinitely rich. Such a view is not entailed or necessitated by the idea of an unseen order. Nonetheless, on an account of the unseen order as multifaceted, religious diversity could be thought of as resulting not only from the varied cultural modes of being religious, but also from manifold character of the invisible world with which the different religions may be in varying degrees of cognitive contact.

James' definition also states that religion concerns our supreme good. This also seems to be a fair statement. As far as the post-axial religions are concerned, it almost seems absurd to suggest otherwise. One of the general features that one finds in religious traditions is the emphasis that every aspect of a person's life is best lived when he or she lives in accordance with their religious teachings so as to illumine their life on earth. Setting aside the various teachings of a better life in the hereafter, if the whole of life is what religions offer the hope of elevating, religious traditions must be concerned with the supreme good of their members. Further, James' definition leaves the nature of our supreme good an open question, thus inviting discussion. Consequently, it would be appropriate to ask at the outset of one of Cobb's interfaith dialogues how the participants from the different religious traditions conceive of the supreme good for human beings. The answers would, of course, differ. Cobb would say that the differences would be good because it is by being open to differences that the traditions are mutually enriched. James' definition of religion could facilitate that enrichment.

The third important element in James' definition is that it is through harmoniously adjusting ourselves to the unseen order that our supreme good is realized. This is the practical element of religion. Again, it seems uncontroversial to say that all religion has a practical element. In isolation as mere ideas, an "unseen order" and "our supreme good" do not have a necessary relationship to one another. The religious traditions all seem to hold to the faith that there indeed is such a relationship. This practical area of religious life in the world's religions is rife with a plethora of rituals, ceremonies, contemplative exercises and devotional activities that underscore Cobb's diversity thesis. Insofar as the practical dimension of the religions requires participation from within to be properly understood, it may be that dialogue is here more limited than in the other areas in what it can impart in the way of mutual understanding. Be that as it may, anyone who seeks to interpret the religious diversity in the world can ill afford to turn a blind eye to the practical dimension. It is out of the practical dimension that much of the data for religious theory arises. Accordingly, to the extent that dialogue can delve into the world's diverse religious practices, the potential benefits for a philosophical understanding of religious diversity cannot be underestimated.

At the end of the day, no meta-theory to justify and explain contrasting and conflicting religious beliefs and practices may be possible. The widespread diversity of the global religious situation may present too many stubborn facts for theorizing to overcome. But even on that possibility, there is no reason why a general definition like that of James cannot combine with the general features of religions identified by Cobb to begin a program to deepen understanding of religious insights and synthesize those insights into revisable and limited philosophical accounts of religious diversity. That, at least, is my suggestion.

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