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Towards a Theology of World Religions: an outline and assessment of the work of John Hick

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The purpose of this essay is to appraise the recent theological programme of the English philosophical theologian, John Hick. Hick's work is principally concerned with the problem of Christianity *vis-à-vis* world religions. I propose, first to adumbrate the background to the present debate; secondly, to present Professor Hick's contribution; and thirdly, to assess the value of his work.

* * * *

In recent years, in Western Europe, there has been an increasing awareness of the existence and potency of religious traditions other than Christianity. Perhaps for the first time, Christians have recognized that other religions are a permanent feature of global history. The nineteenth-century ideal of 'The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation'¹ is still hopelessly unfulfilled, and indeed an embarrassment to many present-day theologians. Nor do recent developments suggest that a new period of missionary expansion on the part of Christianity is likely.² Most Christian thinkers are reconciled to the fact that Christianity exists and will continue to exist alongside other religions. For many, this truth is made even more acute with the recognition that in what was formerly Christendom, rival religious faiths are now conspicuously present and engaged in mission. This is a far cry from the old traditional view which saw Europe as exclusively Christian and the remainder of the world in the process of being Christianized.

The positive reappraisal of other faiths is the result of a combination of factors, not least of which, in Britain, has been a high immigration rate. The nation which did so much to evangelize the world is now having to accommodate rival religious faiths at home.

Another feature which has done much to validate other religions is the increasing wealth of knowledge concerning their origins, history, beliefs and practices—now, more frequently than not, written by adherents themselves.³ Recent scholarly research has contributed greatly to religious understanding and appreciation; it has also shown conclusively that much previous work, supposedly serious, was written with an undeniable Christian bias. Research in the human sciences also

seems to call for a revision of the Christian's attitude to other religions. Psychologists and sociologists have drawn attention to what is regarded as the basic unity of all faiths. They all satisfy the same basic needs and the worshippers respond in the same communal structures.⁴ This unity has also been claimed by adherents of the 'Phenomenological Approach'⁵ in religion. It is concerned primarily with elucidating the universal essences and structures of the religious subject in his 'knowledge of the object'. These trends in research have combined to produce a much more healthy attitude to religions other than Christianity.

Finally, there is the growing recognition among Christian theologians that the old traditional view of other faiths as areas of spiritual darkness, and beyond the pale of salvation,⁶ is not acceptable in such simple terms. The doctrine that outside the institutional church there is no salvation, immediately excludes nine-tenths of humanity, past and present, from God's company. This to many seems irreconcilable with a God of love—a God who wills salvation for every man. Are we to imagine that Christ's death and resurrection, the saving event, has been in vain with regard to the vast majority of mankind? Are we to think of the world outside the church as consisting solely of wilful and deliberate sinners whose moral condition deserves only damnation? New Testament scholars⁷ have reacted against the interpretation of the biblical evidence which excluded the majority of humanity from God's grace. They point to passages in the New Testament which suggest that the benefits of God's salvation in Christ will be applicable to all. Passages like Romans 11:32, 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, 2 Corinthians 5:19, Ephesians 1:9–10 and Colossians 1:19–20 are sometimes interpreted in this way. The idea of universalism is becoming more popular, and any genuine theology of religions must consider its strengths, as well as its weaknesses.⁸

All these factors have combined to produce a new environment for a Christian assessment of world religions. It is against this background that we should consider Professor Hick's contribution.

* * * *

It is only in recent years that Dr Hick has seriously considered the relationship between Christianity and other religions. His earlier work was principally in the field of the philosophy of religion. In his latest book he gives an autobiographical sketch of his theological development, tracing it up to the present, where he views the relation of Christianity to world religions as of paramount importance. His current preoccupation with this topic, he tells us, springs from earlier research into the problem of evil.⁹

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In wrestling with the problem of evil I had concluded that any valuable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures. How then to reconcile the notion of there being one, and only one, true religion with a belief in God's universal saving activity?¹⁰

For Hick, as we shall see, the two ideas of God's universal salvation and one true religion were to prove irreconcilable. His appointment as H. G. Wood professor of theology in the University of Birmingham in 1968, together with visits to India and Sri Lanka in the following years, provided him with the opportunity to observe different religious traditions in a variety of settings, and it is largely as a result of these experiences that Hick proposes his *Christian* theology of religions.

Professor Hick is probably one of the ablest Christian writers of our generation. His expression is lucid and succinct, and, perhaps because of his philosophical background, there is less danger of misrepresentation than with some theologians. As already indicated, it is the books published in the last ten years which will primarily concern us.¹¹ Hick's interest is with the church's understanding of Jesus and the implications of this understanding for other religions. For him, these distinguishable concerns—Christology, and Christianity and world religions—are closely interrelated and co-ordinated. Christology, since it deals with the central figure of Christianity, is properly interpreted as determinative for the church's understanding of other religions. However, for clarificatory purposes we shall study each in turn, to the extent that his treatment allows us.

Concerning Christology

According to Hick, writing in 1958:

The central task of Christology is to give meaning to the dogma that Jesus of Nazareth was both God and man.¹²

In the same essay, Hick distinguishes between the 'substantival' and the 'adjectival' divinity of Christ. His aim is to show the inadequacy of using the adjective 'divine' as a predicate of Christ. As an adjective 'names a quality or universal which may be present in different objects in varying degrees',¹³ accordingly Jesus is divine by degree; he possesses divinity to a greater degree than other men, but he is not different in kind, by any unique ontological relationship to God. This understanding is unsatisfactory for Hick, and he suggests that Christians speak of the 'deity of Christ' to avoid any possible confusion over the God-ness of Christ. However, as Hick points out, in the traditional 'language game', to use Wittgenstein's expression, although 'divine' operates grammatically as an adjective, it functions logically as a substantive. That is to say, the term 'divine' is used to underline and clarify the traditional Christian estimate of Jesus as God. Now clearly

in this period Hick held to a very orthodox Christology. His criticism of D. M. Baillie is precisely this issue: Baillie did not do justice to the deity of Christ. The distinction between 'substantial' and 'adjectival' divinity—which is the distinction between Jesus as the God-Man, *sui generis*, and Jesus as possessing divinity to a greater degree than other men—Hick returns to in subsequent work.¹⁴

In an essay first published in 1966, Hick again takes up the subject of Christology.¹⁵ The provocative title, 'Christology at the Crossroads', indicates the way in which his thought was turning.¹⁶ Hick calls for a 'Copernican revolution' in theology, from a Christianity-centred to a God-centred picture of the world of faiths. He compares the view which sees Christ as the only centre of God's salvation with the old Ptolemaic understanding of the universe, in which the earth was thought of as the centre, with the other planets revolving around it. The new understanding, which sees God as the centre of the world faiths, and each religion a valid channel of salvation, is to be compared with the Copernican model, in which the sun is the centre of the universe, and around which all the planets, including the earth, revolve.

According to Hick, this new understanding can be accomplished only by a reappraisal of traditional Christology. He calls in question the orthodox expression *homoousis*. It is tied too closely to neo-Platonist philosophy, and hence is misleading today. Furthermore, the static character of God which it suggests, is not in accord with the modern biblical understanding of God as active, dynamic and self-giving. Using the insight of the fourth-century church father, Gregory of Nyssa, that the category of 'action' or 'event', rather than 'substance', is a much better starting-point, Hick proceeds to reconstruct Christology. God is known by his actions, and the central activity of God is loving. God's love, or as Hick prefers, God's *Agapé*, becomes the key to understanding and expressing Christ's person. Jesus shows us God's *Agapé*. Indeed, those who met Jesus 'actually and literally' encountered God's *Agapé*, for Jesus' *agapé* is not a representation of God's *Agapé*; it is that *Agapé* operating in a finite mode; it is the eternal divine *Agapé* made flesh, 'inhistorised.'¹⁷ Hick goes on to elucidate the meaning of identifying Jesus' *agapé* with God's *Agapé*. He employs the terms 'qualitative identity' and 'numerical identity'. We need not consider his use of these terms in any detail; it is sufficient to say that, for Hick, a qualitative identity between God's love and Jesus' love is equivalent to an Arian Christology—one which denies the deity of Christ—whereas numerical identity is roughly commensurate with the claims of Chalcedon. Since Hick affirms a numerical identity between God's love and Jesus' love, he refers to his Christology as neo-Chalcedonian.

In the next chapter Hick continues his reappraisal of traditional Christology under the title 'Incarnation and Mythology'. He considers the nature of the central Christian doctrine of the deity of Christ, and argues that the language traditionally employed in the biblical and

Chalcedonian discourse on the deity of Jesus is mythological. The account of God assuming human flesh is a story which is not literally true, but is one which invites a particular attitude and commitment from its hearers. Mythological language is a poetic or symbolic way of expressing religious truths. Since the myth was the accepted form of communication in the Graeco-Roman world in which Christianity first flourished, it was only natural that Christians should utilize it. However, it is not interpreted correctly if we imagine it as an objective, scientific, theological theory. Consequently, the pictorial and mythological language of the incarnation expresses the early church's conviction that, from the beginning of Jesus' life, God was present in him, and this same Jesus now calls for worship and obedience. More simply, it represents the church's opinion that Jesus Christ is Saviour. Hick believes it is now time to translate the story of God assuming human flesh as the Son into more culturally, scientifically and religiously appropriate terms. Jesus was wholly and unqualifiedly a human who mediated God's saving power. He dismisses the unique saviourhood of Christ on the grounds that if only those within the church possess reconciliation, then God's love is compromised. More importantly, the experience of salvation in other religions is denied.

In his concluding remarks, on the worship of Christ, Hick draws attention to the inadequacy of all language forms to express the fulness of God's being and action. As his point of departure, he takes Anselm's philosophical description of God as 'that than which no greater can be conceived'. This allows him to describe God as the Ultimate, and it is the Ultimate alone which must be worshipped. The worship of any lesser reality is idolatry. Yet, as Hick points out, the Ultimate has to be adored under some proximate anthropomorphic images. The limits of language, and the professed Christian understanding of God as beyond description, combine in suggesting to Hick that the different interpretations and images of divine reality in the various religions all convey aspects of the one Ultimate Reality. The diverse descriptions of divine reality in the history of religions witness to the inexpressible and multi-faceted character of the Ultimate. Failure to recognize the mythological character of the incarnation will make it impossible to construct any viable theology of religions.

More recently Professor Hick has expressed his sympathy with the Christology of John Baillie¹⁸ and D. M. Baillie.¹⁹ This admission is all the more surprising when we consider Hick's earlier strictures of D. M. Baillie's position. Obviously Hick's views have changed with regard to the deity of Christ. To use his own terminology, Hick has moved from the 'substantival divinity' to the 'adjectival divinity' of Christ; from a qualitative to a quantitative difference between Christ and ourselves. This shift in Hick's understanding of the incarnation is detectable in the two essays we have considered. In 'Christ and Incarnation' he proposes a Christology based on the insight that Jesus is God's love in

action, which he labels neo-Chalcedonian. Yet in 'Incarnation and Mythology' he examines the nature of traditional language which ascribes deity to Christ, and concludes that it is mythological—it is not a precise theological theory. Hence he dismisses orthodox Christological assertions, and presumably his own earlier effort as misdirected. We will postpone critical comments until we have considered in greater detail his interpretation of the relation between Christianity and other religions.

Concerning world religions

Professor Hick presupposes the validity of the features outlined in our opening section. They have produced a new world situation which demands a fresh appraisal of world religions by Christians. It is time to construct a global theology which does justice to the plurality of religious beliefs and expressions.²⁰ Again, as in Christology, Hick begins with the love of God, the love which wills salvation for every man. His basic concern is 'salvation of the whole humanity'. If, as traditionalists believe, Christ is the only way of salvation and salvation depends upon a conscious response to Christ, then patently the vast majority of mankind, past and present, are lost. This idea is unacceptable to Hick. If God's salvation is tied to the church, then his love is thwarted by the historical particularity of Christianity. For Hick, God's love is universal in scope. God cannot have restricted his saving encounter with humanity to one single stream of human history, that of the Judaeo-Christian. God is savingly present in all the great religions. In support of the idea that salvation exists outside the church, Hick refers to the work of the Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner²¹ and Hans Küng.²² They both reflect the growing disquiet among Christian thinkers of the church's claimed monopoly of salvation experience. The recent descriptions of adherents of other religions as 'anonymous Christians', 'latent church', as possessing 'implicit faith', all indicate to Hick the growing untenability of the orthodox opinion which denies salvation outside the church, and suggest to him that his thesis is an increasingly compelling alternative.

He rejects the view that salvation is only through Christ. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity all provide valid ways of salvation. God's saving encounter with man is not confined to one world faith. God's love demands that all men encounter God, and the different religions mediate God's grace to each individual's existential situation. The various faiths embody different revelations of the one Absolute Reality acting savingly towards mankind. Accordingly, Hick believes that God has been revealing himself through various men, in different places and periods of world history. The world religions are not discrete and incompatible religious philosophies, but are man's response to divine revelation conditioned by the various, ethnic,

geographical, psychological, economic, sociological and historical features. These features produce distinguishable cultural regions, and within each region the response to the divine has taken its own characteristic form. The religious faiths are expressions of the one divine reality which has revealed 'himself-itself' in the cultural form most appropriate to the people concerned.²³

An outstanding or obvious criticism of Hick's position, and one which he attempts to meet, is: What of the conflicting truth claims? The religious faiths have very different understandings of the nature of existence and the ultimate destination of the 'individual'. They even speak of Ultimate Reality in a variety of terms, which to many seem incompatible. In Christianity, divine reality is personal; in some expressions of Hinduism it is non-personal; and in Theravāda Buddhism, Ultimate Reality or *nibbāna* is beyond the categories of personal or non-personal. Hick attempts to meet the force of this objection by emphasizing that, in all the great religious traditions, divine reality is understood as transcending the grasp of the human mind—to use western terminology, God is infinite. From this, it follows for Hick that the different understandings of the transcendent are encounters of the one Ultimate conditioned by cultural and historical features. The different perceptions of the divine, witness to its inexhaustible depth. It is not explicable by one group of categories alone; 'he-it' transcends all categories.

Finally, in our review of Professor Hick's proposals, we will consider the essay 'Jesus and the World Religions', which he contributed to *The Myth of God Incarnate*.²⁴ This provocative essay contains most of the points to which we have already alluded but it does introduce a few novel features. He begins in characteristic fashion by dismissing the deity of Christ as the inappropriate objectifying of the mythological language of the New Testament. He parallels the development of Christological thought in the church with that of Mahāyāna Buddhism's exaltation of the human Gotama into a divine or heavenly Buddha (*Sambhogakāya*). He argues that the elevation of a human figure into a divine-hero saviour is 'a tendency of the religious mind' to assign ultimacy to the object of devotion. Obviously, in another religious tradition this inclination is more quickly seen for what is is—a mythological way of saying that Gotama brings salvation. What Hick demands is that we now see traditional Christian estimates of Jesus in the same light.

From this he goes on to discredit the claim that Christ's deity depends on, or is vindicated by, the resurrection. He draws attention to the ambiguous nature of the resurrection event, the numerous raisings of the dead recounted in the New Testament, and the anti-Trinitarian language of the earliest Christologies. Once Hick has dispensed with the hypothesis that Christ's deity is a consequence of his resurrection, he returns to the explication of how the human Jesus

could become the divine Lord. For Hick, Jesus exemplifies 'God-consciousness'. He could refer to God as 'Abba'—Father, Daddy. Jesus had an intimate awareness of God, and hence a spirituality unattained by his contemporaries. His concern was to share his insights with other men, and this experience resulted in their 'salvation'. Christology grew out of reflection upon the experience of reconciliation and was naturally expressed in Hebraic thought forms, which in turn become Hellenized. The decisive encounter with God, which Jesus brought about in the hearts and minds of men, ensured that significantly lofty descriptions of his person were used. Jesus became the Christ, Lord, Son of God, the Word, etc. These titles, which primarily expressed in poetic, symbolic and mythological language the significance of Jesus, in time were misinterpreted as metaphysical descriptions of Jesus' identity with God. According to Hick, it is now time to recognize the mistaken quality of traditional orthodox language. The basic New Testament portrait of Christ presents us with a man concerned with salvation, and if the church is to be true to the New Testament it must eschew ideas of deity. This proposal leaves the way open for a genuine theology of religions which acknowledges the validity of all the world faiths as ways of salvation.

Let us try to draw the themes together:

Christianity is a way of salvation... The other great world faiths are likewise ways of salvation providing the principal path to the divine reality for other large sections of humanity. I have also suggested that the idea that Jesus proclaimed himself as God incarnate, and as the sole point of saving contact between God and man, is without adequate historical foundation and represents a doctrine developed by the church.²⁵

Hick's proposals take the form of a pincer-movement on the exclusiveness of Christianity among world religions. First, he maintains, on the basis of God's love, that religions other than Christianity provide a satisfactory way of salvation. Secondly, he attacks the idea which locates the uniqueness of Christ in his deity, for, as Hick suggests, the New Testament does not teach that Jesus is God. Jesus is to be subsumed under the same category as all the great religious figures of history. He, like Buddha, Mohammed, Isaiah, Zoroaster, etc., was wholly and unqualifiedly human. He does not stand apart by virtue of his identity of 'substance' with God.

* * * *

The theology of world religions is clearly not just of academic concern to Professor Hick. He is existentially involved in such studies. In 'A Spiritual Pilgrimage', the autobiographical sketch which he contributed to his most recent book,²⁶ he movingly reports how he reached his

present position. One cannot but be impressed by his humility, sensitivity and concern to take God's love seriously. His proposals are a real attempt to do justice to the sufficiency of God's love. His total theology can be viewed from this perspective: God's love requires that all men be saved, and this in turn demands that religions other than Christianity provide salvation.

Hick's programme is the result of long and critical reflection upon the cardinal doctrines of Christianity. He has come to espouse universalism, to advocate a form of unitarianism, and to encourage religious pluralism by suggesting that all the great religions provide ways of salvation. By biblical, theological and philosophical means, Hick supports the validity of these ideas. Little of what he proposes is new; parallels can be recognized in the earlier work of other thinkers. Universalism has a long history of proponents, from the time of Origen in the third century. His Christology is very similar to the teaching of F. W. Schleiermacher,²⁷ and his understanding of the relation of Christianity to other religions, which denies the uniqueness of the Christian faith, is akin to that of E. Troeltsch²⁸ and A. Toynbee,²⁹ both of whom advocated 'cultural relativism'. Hick's originality lies not in his discovery of new ideas, but in the way he has combined and given coherent and unified expression to formerly unconnected beliefs.

There are many praiseworthy features in Hick's work. He has contributed to our knowledge of other religions, as well as their relationship to each other. He offers his work in the hope of increasing respect and co-operation between the adherents of the great world religions. He also correctly recognizes that all religions are conditioned by cultural and historical features. Furthermore, Hick provides a useful corrective to the 'Christian exclusivism' of Karl Barth. Barth consistently refused to recognize any revelation of God, or expression of God's grace, in any religion.³⁰ Hick is surely correct in rejecting this thesis, which denies any experience of God beyond the church. He is also correct in stressing the reality of the human nature of Jesus, though such a claim is by no means incompatible with Chalcedonian Christology.

Yet, despite these positive features, there are defects and shortcomings in Professor Hick's work. He will begin with some brief criticisms of peripheral aspects of his programme. First, the place of Gotama the Buddha within the system of belief of Buddhism is so different from the position of Jesus within Christianity, that much greater justification than that given by Hick is required if one is to regard these systems as belonging to the same category. Secondly, Hick's refusal to assign any significance to the resurrection as a revelation of Christ's uniqueness, seems to contradict a well attested tradition in early Christianity, as well as ignoring the influential trend in contemporary theology which regards the resurrection as the central event of God's self-revelation in history.³¹

In the third case, his call for a Copernican revolution from a Christ-

centred to a God-centred picture of the universe of faiths reveals a serious misunderstanding of Christian experience. For the Christian, what Christ revealed in his life, death, and resurrection is true of God at all times and in all places. God is what we have found to be in the person and work of Christ. Hence the distinction between God-centred and Christ-centred, which Hick supposes, does not exist. God is as Christ has revealed him. If God is the centre of the world faiths, then Christ must be the centre also. Christ is indispensable for the Christian concept of God.

Finally, Hick misrepresents the orthodox understanding of salvation. He maintains that because Christians believe Christ revealed God uniquely, it must follow that there is no revelation of God outside Christianity. Hick is mistaken in drawing this conclusion. The New Testament documents, which clearly regard Christ as unique, also insist that God has given indicators of his presence to all people; it is on this basis that Christians speak of 'general or universal revelation'. It also does not follow, as Hick holds, that because Christ is presented by Christians as the only Saviour, 'the whole religious life of mankind beyond the stream of Judaic-Christian faith is thus by implication excluded as lying beyond the sphere of salvation.'³² The Christian insistence upon Christ as the 'one mediator' is not an attempt to confine God's saving activity to the organized church and consign all those who have never had opportunity to respond to Christ to perdition. Instead, it is an assertion of the universal significance of Christ's death and resurrection; salvation wherever experienced can be only through Christ.

There are other more important aspects of Hick's work which deserve consideration. His confessed premise of universalism, understood as the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures, is open to serious criticism. He departs from the type of universalism usually advocated, where the benefits of Christ's death are made applicable to all. Instead, Hick proposes that salvation is found in each religion, and consequently, is mediated by the great religious figures and their teachings. While it is even debatable that universalism as such is taught in the Bible,³³ it is beyond dispute that Hick's understanding is not expounded—on the contrary, it is categorically rejected. The biblical writers link salvation to Christ exclusively; they do not conceive of other saviours or mediators. The earliest teachers and writers of the church all think of Christ as the only Saviour. The expression 'There is salvation in no-one else' (Acts 4:12) adequately summarize the New Testament view. Hick's opinion of Gotama, Mohammed, Zoroaster, etc. as mediators is antithetical to traditional Christian thinking, for Christ is the universal Saviour. All those whom God graciously chooses to save, are saved by Christ.

Hick's interpretation of Jesus and the meaning of salvation is linked by his conception of God-consciousness. Jesus had a special awareness

of God, indicated by his description of God as 'Abba'. According to Hick, Jesus was accredited with divinity by his followers because of the potency of his God-consciousness, which when mediated by his teaching and presence brought 'salvation' to his hearers. The experience of God, which is partially and imperfectly present in all men, was fully and consummately manifest in Jesus and spreads from him to his disciples. This is the meaning which the Christian affirmations of Jesus as God and Saviour intend to convey. The question arises: Is it correct or even adequate to interpret Christ's divinity and work of redemption in terms of God-consciousness? To put this another way: Hick describes Christ the Saviour in terms of function; Christ's consciousness is absolutely God-saturated and his purpose is to communicate this awareness to his followers, an awareness which redeems them from all sinfulness. Certainly this is true, but does it go far enough? Does traditional faith not assert that the difference between Christ and other holy men is more than a question of function? It is a difference which can be described only as a difference of being. On Hick's criteria, the distinctiveness of Christ is hardly absolute. This is the outcome of his over-concentration upon what Christ did, without similar reference to who Christ is. The latter is not, as Hick suggests, exclusively a consequence of the former. Christology is not a function of soteriology, so that Christ's person can be reduced without remainder to his work. Moreover, the idea of God-consciousness, which is undoubtedly present in Christ's ministry and teaching, is inadequate if it is made the sole determinant of Christ's person; it needs to be considered in association with other biblical concepts such as the kingdom of God, the titles and miracles of Jesus, etc.

The inappropriateness of God-consciousness as the sole expression of Christ's person and work is further revealed in Hick's treatment of the atonement. He relegates the traditional interpretation of Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice to a mistaken deduction from the Jewish sacrificial system. In keeping with this, he omits any reference to sin as the ground of man's alienation from God. Jesus is thought of more in the style of an Eastern holy man who transmits knowledge, rather than God reconciling the world to himself by his Son's death. The redemptive work of Christ, for Hick, is to transmit Jesus' God-consciousness to others 'by spiritual contagion'.³⁴ He does not offer his own positive understanding of the atonement,³⁵ though it seems likely that he would propose the 'exemplarist' theory, perhaps of a type similar to the late G. W. H. Lampe,³⁶ and consequently open to the same criticisms.

Dr Hick also seems to be weak in his handling of the New Testament evidence. He dismisses entirely John's account of Jesus' ministry, as well as exhibiting a profound scepticism of the historical trustworthiness of the synoptic gospels' picture of Jesus. Now it must be admitted that there are scholars who would support Hick in these conclusions, but modern New Testament study is moving away from such oversceptical

judgements.³⁷ Yet even if we allow Hick's position, it need not necessarily entail a reductionist Christology. As Sir Edwyn Hoskyns³⁸ showed almost fifty years ago, there is no tradition in the gospels, even the earliest, which does not contain a definite Christology. From the outset, soteriological thinking developed within a Christological framework. Also, despite the radicalness of Hick's interpretation of Jesus, he does not sufficiently examine the New Testament evidence: for example, discussion of Paul's Christology is entirely absent.

The criticisms noted so far raise in an acute form the question of the authority or normative value of the Bible for Hick. This also applies to his attitude to classical Christian theology. He accepts certain elements, e.g. 'Jesus is Saviour', but rejects others such as 'Jesus is Lord', at least as traditionally understood. This selection by Hick, in common with other radical thinkers, seems more than a little arbitrary. On what basis does he accept that Jesus is Saviour, but yet reject the equally biblical and traditional assertion that Jesus is the universal Saviour and Lord? Or how can Hick accept the report of the disciples' experience that Jesus brought them into fellowship with God, and yet reject their understanding of the new experience that Christ had died for sin and been raised by God? Or again, if the early Christians wrongly attributed deity to Jesus, might they not also have been mistaken about his potency to save? Hick never explicates his understanding of the authority of Scripture, nor the position accorded to orthodox Christian thinking. Until such time as he does, conventional criticisms, to his understanding of his use of Scripture and Christian tradition, may be wide of the mark.

So unlikely a critic as Don Cupitt accuses Hick of syncretism. This claim is warranted if we consider Hick's understanding of the great faiths as religious encounters of the one Absolute, acting savingly towards mankind. He calls for a sharing of religious experience between the adherents of the great religions. Cupitt pertinently remarks:

The case against Hick is that projects like his will always founder on the rock of the irreducible dissimilarity of religions.³⁹

Hick gives scant attention to the dissimilarity of the different faiths. Can the cultural differences which Hick supposes, adequately account for the very diverse, if not contradictory, teaching of the various religions? It is doubtful if such incompatible views can find their origin in the one Ultimate, as Hick prefers to call God. It also goes without saying that the New Testament rejects syncretism.⁴⁰

Hick's teaching on the nature of the Absolute, and his conviction that there is one essential truth underlying all religion, is strikingly similar to the teaching of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.⁴¹ This is noteworthy when we consider that Radhakrishnan was a Hindu who wrote from a Vedantic monistic perspective. There is also similarity between

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their interpretations of Jesus. They both regard Jesus as the illustrator of the timeless eternal truth that man can attain consciousness of spiritual oneness with God, and Jesus is one of many who exemplify this truth. Both Hick and Radhakrishnan seem to espouse the view that it is not the historical as such, or events in history which establish salvation; instead, salvation consists of recognizing and appropriating the metaphysical idea of God-consciousness or God-manhood which has been illustrated by Jesus and other holy men. The one thing which this view cannot accept is the claim which orthodox Christians are bound to make, that God has acted definitively in one historic person, his Son, and this revelation is the centre to which all men's views of God must be corrected or fulfilled.

Finally, Hick's use of Anselm's philosophical description of God to show that the different interpretations found in the world religions are not contradictory, since all descriptions are relative, is questionable. He is correct, in that all descriptions are inadequate to express God's fullness of Being, but he is incorrect in thus assuming that all descriptions are valid and equal. God's action in Christ, as we have already suggested, is the point of departure for a proper understanding of God, and it is also in the light of this disclosure that all other ideas must be considered. Perhaps the context of Anselm's account of God will further reveal its inadequacy: Anselm was attempting to prove God's existence without invoking Christian faith and teaching. Such a description, with its appeal to natural reason, cannot be made the determining centre of the doctrine of God, as Hick wishes. The Christian approach to other religions must begin with the truths of the Christian revelation—not with some philosophical dictum.⁴²

It is surely possible to combine respect and admiration for Hick's work with some doubt about the sufficiency of his attack upon either the exclusiveness of Christianity or the deity of Christ. We can agree with his belief that God has never left himself without witnesses; in every circumstance and place there are pointers to God, and we as Christians must welcome that which is true and good wherever it is found. But we also recognize, to use the old phrase, 'the scandal of particularity', that there has been a certain revelation of God which surpasses all others and which provides the key to a proper understanding of, and orientation to, God. The key is Jesus Christ in the totality of his being and action. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the 'God-Man', and the traditional doctrine of the incarnation, are more robust than Hick imagines.

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NOTES

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- 1 This aim was adopted as the watchword of the Student Volunteer Missionary Union in 1873. Quoted in E. C. Dewick, *The Gospel and Other Faiths* (Canterbury Press, London 1948), p.87.
- 2 The demise of Christian missionary activity is discussed in the following: H. T. Hoekstra, *Evangelism in Eclipse* (Paternoster Press, Exeter 1979); E. Kendall, *The End of an Era* (SPCK, London 1978).
- 3 An outstanding example is S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (Allen & Unwin, London 1927); *The Heart of Hindusthan* (G. A. Natesan, Madras 1936). For full bibliography: P. A. Schlipp, *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan* (Tudor Publishing, New York 1952), pp.846-61.
- 4 M. Argyle, *Religious Behaviour* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1958); M. Argyle, 'Seven Psychological Roots of Religion', *Theology*, 67, 1964, pp.333-9; L. B. Brown, 'A Study of Religious Belief', *British Journal of Psychology*, 53, 1962, pp.259-72.
- 5 For a good short introductory essay: E. F. Sharpe, 'The Phenomenology of Religion', *Learning for Living*, 15, 1975, pp.4-9.
- 6 The papal pronouncement of Boniface VIII in 1302: 'We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins' (H. Denzinger, 468). *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (B. Herder Book Company, St Louis 1955), p.153.
- 7 C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1932); J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (Collins Fount, London 1968).
- 8 For a recent discussion of universalism: S. H. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future of Man* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester 1980), pp.118-36.
- 9 J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Macmillan, London 1966).
- 10 J. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Macmillan, London 1980), pp.4-5; further autobiographical reflections are found in J. Hick, 'Pilgrimage in Theology', *Epworth Review*, 6, 1979, pp.73-8.
- 11 J. Hick, *Christianity at the Centre* (Macmillan, London 1968); *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Macmillan, London 1973; paperback edition, Collins Fount, London 1977). The paperback edition has a new preface and slight revision, and it is from this edition that we will quote. *Death and Eternal Life* (Collins, London 1976; paperback edition 1979). This specialized study is the practical application of Hick's global theology to a particular topic; but as we are considering the theological foundations, set out in earlier works, we need not deal with it. J. Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, London 1977); and *God Has Many Names*.
- 12 'The Christology of D. M. Baillie', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 11, 1958, p.1.
- 13 *ibid.*, p.1.
- 14 See Introduction and chapters referred to in *God and the Universe of Faiths*.
- 15 F. G. Healey, ed., *Prospect for Theology* (James Nisbet, Digswell Place 1966), pp.137-66.
- 16 Also published as 'Christ and Incarnation' in *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp.148-64. All subsequent references are to this revised version.
- 17 *ibid.*, p.159.
- 18 John Baillie, *The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1929).
- 19 D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (Faber and Faber, London 1961).
- 20 Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp.92-147. These pages constitute Hick's most systematic attempt to construct a global theology.
- 21 K. Rahner, 'Christianity and Non-Christian Religions' in *Theological Investigations*, 5

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- (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1966); 'Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church' in *Theological Investigations*, 12 (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1974); 'Anonymous and Explicit Faith' and 'The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation' in *Theological Investigations*, 16 (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1979).
- 22 H. Küng, 'The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation' in J. Neuner, ed., *Christian Revelation and World Religions* (Burns & Oates, London 1967); *On Being a Christian* (Collins, London 1976), part A, III.
 - 23 On this understanding Hick admits his indebtedness to W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Mentor Books, New York 1963).
 - 24 Hick's essay is also included in *God Has Many Names*.
 - 25 Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 145.
 - 26 Hick, *God has Many Names*, pp. 1-9.
 - 27 F. W. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1928). Schleiermacher uses the concept of 'God-consciousness' to provide the key to Christ's person and work. Hick's interpretation of Jesus is almost identical to Schleiermacher's. It is also noteworthy that Schleiermacher taught universalism (cf. E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, Vol. I [Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1949] p. 353).
 - 28 E. Troeltsch, 'The place of Christianity among World Religions' in *Christian Thought* (University of London, London 1957); *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, (John Knox Press, Virginia 1971).
 - 29 A. J. Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World* (OUP, London 1958). Both Toynbee and Troeltsch are discussed in O. C. Thomas, ed., *Attitudes Toward Other Religions* (SCM Press, London 1969).
 - 30 Religion (including the Christian) according to Barth is the human attempt to reach a god and worship him; it is therefore to be contrasted with revelation. This is the position he adopted in his famous commentary on *Romans* (OUP, London 1933). He gives fuller treatment in Section 17 of *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, part 2, pp. 280-361, characteristically entitled, 'The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion' (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1956).
 - 31 J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (SCM Press, London 1965); W. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (SCM Press, London 1968). Both these writers relate their discussion to the Bible, and indeed understand their interpretation to be in accord with the biblical material.
 - 32 Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. 179.
 - 33 N. T. Wright, 'Towards a Biblical View of Universalism', *Themelios*, 4, 1979, pp. 54-8; also J. D. Bettis, 'A Critique of the Doctrine of Universal Salvation', *Religious Studies*, 6, 1970, pp. 329-44.
 - 34 Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. 172.
 - 35 He does make a few tantalizingly brief remarks in Michael Goulder, ed., *Incarnation and Myth* (SCM Press, London 1979), pp. 77-84, which in turn are criticized by C. Moule and B. Hebblethwaite, pp. 85-100.
 - 36 G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977). For a critique of Lampe, see E. L. Mascall, *Whatever Happened to the Human Mind?* (SPCK, London 1980), pp. 97-117.
 - 37 Recent surveys of New Testament scholarship seem to suggest this: G. Aulen, *Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1976); P. Henry, *New Directions in New Testament Study* (SCM Press, London 1980).
 - 38 E. Hoskyns, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (Faber & Faber, London 1931).
 - 39 D. Cupitt, *The Debate about Christ* (SCM Press, London 1979), p. 141.
 - 40 See W. A. Visser't Hooft, *No Other Name* (SCM Press, London 1963).
 - 41 S. Radhakrishnan presents his understanding of the unity of faiths in *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (OUP, London 1940); *East and West in Religion* (Allen & Unwin, London 1933). M. M. Thomas in *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (SCM Press, London 1969), pp. 150-92, discusses

Radhakrishnan's doctrine that all historical religions are different forms of the true religion, as well as his 'mystical understanding' of Christ.

- 42 Criticism of Hick's understanding and use of the term 'myth', and his understanding of the relationship between religion and culture, could be made, but the former has been dealt with sufficiently in other literature and the latter would require greater discussion than is possible here.