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## LEAVING THINGS AS THEY ARE : A RESPONSE TO JOHN HICK AND PAUL BADHAM

BEVERLEY J. CLACK

Two recent lectures given at King's illustrate a trend within the philosophy of religion towards a generalising approach to the truth claims of different religious traditions. Initially, the titles of these lectures seem to have little in common; Professor John Hick on *The Buddha's undetermined questions and the conflicting truth claims of different religions*<sup>1</sup>, and Professor Paul Badham's paper, *Towards a global view of immortality*<sup>2</sup>. This paper will attempt to show the similar presuppositions underlying these accounts, drawing upon both the material used in their lectures and in their most recent works, with a view to showing the problems which arise from such misunderstandings of the way in which religious language should be interpreted. In conclusion, an alternative way of considering religious belief will be advocated.

While John Hick's lecture dealt largely with the Buddha's distinction between religious questions which could be answered and those which could not, I wish to consider initially Hick's use of this principle when he subdivides the content of truth claims into the historical, the trans-historical and those which are "concepts of Ultimate Reality"<sup>3</sup>. Hick's concern is to find the common ground — if common ground there be — between the world faiths, and as such he considers these three categories in terms of the amount of conflict produced by each category.

He sees few important conflicts arising from the first category of historical truth claims; regardless of one's religious sympathies, few would deny the historicity of Christ, the Buddha or Muhammed. Within the category of trans-historical claims, that is, questions whose answers are beyond the scope of human knowledge (for example, theories about the origin of the universe, life after death etc), Hick denies the importance attached to such questions. These questions are unanswerable, for as finite beings we cannot by definition transcend the world in which we live.

It is on the level of claims concerned with ultimate reality that genuine conflict apparently lies. This 'ultimate reality' is spoken of as personal in, for example, the Christian doctrine of God, and impersonal, as in Buddhism; it is therefore difficult to see how differences between faiths on this level are to be overcome. Hick's solution to the problem is two-fold. He begins by defining this 'ultimate reality' as 'the Real'. Such a term is capable, he believes, of encompassing all religious responses to reality:

In Christian terms it gives rise to no difficulty to identify God, the sole self-existent reality, as the Real. With Islam, the Real, al Haqq, is one of the names of Allah. Within the Hindu family of faiths it is natural to think of the ultimate reality, Brahman, as sat or satya, the Real. Within Mahayana Buddhism the Dharmakaya or sunyata is also spoken of as tattva, the Real. In Chinese religious thought the ultimate is zhen, the Real<sup>4</sup>.

While such a breakdown of religious belief to the lowest common denominator is undoubtedly useful when attempting to conduct some form of dialogue between the world faiths, it has to be asked whether this deconstructing of religious

imagery is beneficial for the wider context of the believer's life. Would Christian worship, for example, benefit from calling God 'the Real' rather than 'Father'? It seems unlikely that such an impersonal pronoun would be adequate in this context.

Hick goes on to claim that such questions concerning the "reality of the real" can rightly be described as unanswerable questions. We cannot know what God is really like; religious beliefs about the divine nature are, in Kantian terms, the products of the reflective abilities of the human mind. The truth of such ideas lies not in their relationship to the external reality who is God, but in their soteriological effectiveness, i.e. in how they affect the life of the believer:

Their truthfulness is the practical truthfulness which consists in guiding us aright<sup>5</sup>.

As such, the individual names for the Real are not particularly important: what matters is the kind of lifestyle which arises from holding certain beliefs about the divine life.

This sounds a strong argument, and it allows Hick to deny a realist account of religious doctrines while holding to a realist conception of God. In other words, we cannot *know* that God is triune in his being along the lines of the trinitarian confession of faith within Christian belief; rather our ideas about God are human expressions concerning him which our lives express. Hence, the meaning of belief in the triune God is to be found in the way in which we relate to others as God relates to himself. It is a belief which springs from our cultural background. Such an account means that other truth claims need not be excluded; human doctrines about God are precisely that, human. All religions are ways of seeking the one reality who is God.

From this statement it becomes apparent that Hick's realism is of a significantly qualified kind. He denies the legitimacy of adopting a "naive realism"<sup>6</sup> which fails to take account of the human nature of religious doctrines, describing his own position as that of a 'critical realist'<sup>7</sup>. Such a position allows Hick to maintain a realist concept of God as existent and objective, whilst allowing him to accept the forms of religion to be based upon human spirituality:

We can therefore only experience the Real as its presence affects our distinctively human modes of consciousness, varying as these do in their apperceptive resources and habits from culture to culture and from individual to individual<sup>8</sup>.

Initially, this sounds a highly attractive position to adopt. God is defined as an existent reality, while differences between the religions are not important as they reveal different ways of approaching the one reality which is God. However, it is with this claim that the problem arises. If God is 'real' in the sense of being an existent reality, then surely some truth claims about him are going to come nearer to the truth of his reality than others. A further and more extreme problem concerns the possibility of knowing what God is like *at all* under Hick's schema. Hick is content to see the main religions as pointing towards that which is truly Real; yet this does not seem to do justice to the varied forms of discourse about God which have been produced by the world faiths. Something seems to have been lost by attempting to remove more distinctive and individual language in favour of maintaining the general precept that God, or the Real, exists.

Despite his insistence upon the paramount importance of accepting the existence of God, Hick's position comes remarkably close to that of the 'non-realists'. A non-realist considers the idea of God in terms other than that of traditional theism. God is not an existent, objective being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, immutable etc etc. Rather, God is the sum of human spirituality, the goal for moral endeavour, or made 'real' in the use of religious language and the praxis of the believer<sup>9</sup>. However, to hold such a position is not enough for Hick:

Critical realism holds that the realm of religious experience and belief is not in toto human projection and illusion but constitutes a range of cognitive responses, varying from culture to culture, to the presence of a transcendent reality or realities<sup>10</sup>.

Hick places a negative rendering on the nature of non-realism. To hold that religion is based purely in the human means for Hick that we are under the spell of an 'illusion'. While I share Hick's concern that a non-realist position may lead to a sense that the believer is deluded, I believe that it is only a *form* of non-realism which can take adequate account of the differences between believers without the contradictions inherent in Hick's account. Having so dispensed with a referential account of religious language, it seems odd that Hick should still wish to adhere to a notion of God which is eminently referential. We may not be able to know what God is like, but we can know that he exists. I should like to claim that such dichotomy springs from Hick's misunderstanding of the way in which religious language operates, a theme which will be considered once Paul Badham's account of immortality has been discussed.

Badham, who himself draws much from Hick's approach<sup>11</sup>, gives an account of immortality which attempts to show agreement between different religions as to the nature of "life after death". Indeed, in his lecture, he claimed that 'all' religions adhere to a particular understanding of the path the soul is to take after death. Once dead, we move to a "mind-dependent" state. However, it would not be a satisfactory state of affairs if we were to continue as disembodied selves, for Badham wishes to agree with much that has been written concerning personhood as a psycho-somatic unity, and thus there will be a day of resurrection when the soul will assume a new and glorious heavenly body.

The problem with such a general account of 'what the religions say' is that it must necessarily reduce the material to a common level. Hence, Badham interprets the Buddhist understanding of nirvana to be a state of bliss, rather than the end of selfhood and thus the end of all striving. He combines the ideas of immortality of the soul, a predominantly Greek idea, with those concerning resurrection from the Hebraic tradition. He does to an extent qualify this position by redefining 'resurrection'. Such a concept can only be used appropriately if it "does not entail the resuscitation or re-creation of our present bodies"<sup>12</sup>. Badham arrives at this position through consideration of the knowledge which we now have of the nature of physical decay. It would be ridiculous if we continued to believe that at some point in time the graves would open and we would rise, our bodies intact.

Badham's understanding of what 'resurrection' has traditionally meant does not do justice to the belief itself. Resurrection, more so than 'immortality', has stressed the sovereign

nature of God. It is God who breathes life into us; it is God who has the power to raise the dead. Further, in an age which has come to recognise the psycho-somatic unity of human beings, a concept of resurrection speaks of the totality of the human being, in marked contrast to the Cartesian view of the self underpinning modern concepts of immortality.

Badham's account of 'life after death', in its attempt to attain a coherent view of what may await us after death, fails to do justice to the language employed by believers. Drawing upon his use of the Christian belief in 'eternal life', this omission can be most clearly seen. In order to achieve a position which takes account of the various insights into the next life espoused by the religions, Badham must necessarily displace the language of eternal life from the context in which such language is used. In other words, the language to do with 'eternal life' ('life after death', in Badham's words), is removed from other language and beliefs about this world, the nature of reality, God etc. Badham's concern with 'eternal life' lies not with the role that such a belief plays in the life of the believer, but with "the question of its truth or falsehood"<sup>13</sup>.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Badham joins Hick in rejecting the position of the non-realists. Rejecting D Z Phillips' view that talk of eternal life is to be understood in terms of the life which the Christian leads here and now, Badham claims that:

Talk of 'resurrection' tends to become vacuous when it is taken to relate solely to our present existence<sup>14</sup>.

It would actually be more correct to say that the language of eternal life is misunderstood when it is isolated from the experience of resurrection in the believer's life and used as a hypothesis for a future state of existence.

This misunderstanding reaches almost comic proportions when Badham turns to supernatural events to back up his thesis. He cites 'out of body' experiences as providing evidence for the existence of the soul after death:

Near-death experiences are therefore of the utmost importance to research in life after death, for the evidential features in the reports made by resuscitated persons about their supposed observations provide some of the strongest grounds for supposing that the separation of the self from the body is possible<sup>15</sup>.

While accepting such quasi-scientific grounds for verifying his thesis, Badham rejects other equally strange paranormal events which would apparently bear witness to alternative beliefs about the nature of continued existence. He rejects the reports of people who remember past existences which would apparently support ideas of reincarnation. His reason:

The evidence for reincarnation points not to immortality but to extinction<sup>16</sup>.

As only a few individuals bear witness to such experiences and as the memories tend either to fade or need to be recovered under hypnosis, the individual who existed in the previous incarnation would appear to have little to do with the subject who remembers isolated events in that person's life<sup>17</sup>. As such, 'I' cannot hope to live again, as the 'I' of this present incarnation will not be remembered in the next. While this may be the case, the problem inherent in Badham's thesis at this point becomes

most evident. While claiming to be considering the evidence that the world's religions give for 'life after death', Badham begins with a Graeco-Christian understanding of immortality and then fits the 'evidence' to it. Generalising of this kind leads not to clarity of the positions held by different believers, but to a conglomeration of ideas and impressions which may or may not reflect the specific insights of a community into the nature of existence.

Both Hick and Badham are concerned to give a general account of religious belief. They ignore the differences between the world faiths in order to say that all believers are moving towards the same goal. In Hick, this focus of concern is God; in Badham, the life beyond. While this undoubtedly is for the worthwhile reason of destroying intolerance and bringing about interfaith dialogue, it must necessarily mean that the distinctive nature of a faith's language is lost. We might appear to be saying different things, but ultimately we are not. Thus, God can be spoken of as both impersonal and personal in Hick; nirvana and heaven are one and the same in Badham.

This leads to the preliminary point I wish to make in response to this material. Hick and Badham illustrate what happens to concepts when removed from the context in which they are situated. For Hick, this means a negation of the distinctive elements within a religion in favour of an overall understanding of the focus of religious concern. Hence, it is not the kind of God that matters but the idea of God as an existent possibility. I believe there is a danger in so considering the concept of God. The regulating nature of belief in God for one's life is replaced by belief in an external reality which may have some or little effect upon one's life. Consequently, while newspapers continue to report the dropping-off of church attendance, most people would claim to entertain the possibility of an Ultimate Being. Yet if this has no effect upon one's life, what sort of belief is this? Isn't it rather like holding to the belief that there are green men on Mars? — an interesting, but ultimately unimportant belief when living out one's life from day to day. This may be an unfair criticism of Hick's position, but it does show the problem of removing God from the context of the tradition in which beliefs about him are expressed.

For Badham, the problem is seen more acutely, for immortality becomes an abstract, external truth with little importance attached to its place within a given tradition. By removing a concept from its context, misunderstanding about the way in which that concept is used automatically arises. Hence, D Z Phillips in his 1983 Marett Lecture, *Primitive Reactions and the Reactions of Primitives* sees such misunderstanding about the way in which religious language is used as giving rise to metaphysics<sup>18</sup>; it is only within the context of the religious life that meaning can be given to concepts such as 'eternal life', 'God' etc. Any other approach leads to a false, quasi-scientific account which has little to do with the life of faith.

Furthermore, religious concepts only make sense within the context of the faith in which they are formulated. The problem comes when this context is not taken into account. Badham, for example, like many other 'liberal' Christians, finds the concept of hell problematic<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, if one considers it as some kind of cosmic bonfire, eternally consuming and torturing the souls of the damned, it is not easily reconcilable with the idea of a loving God. However, if seen within the context of the individual human experience, it takes on a new significance. A life lived without a moral vision could indeed be

termed as 'hell'. The actions that we do, or fail to do, matter. This idea of the present reality of judgement is alluded to in John's Gospel:

No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already. (Jn 3v18)

Removing this statement from the realm of this world into a hypothetical next leads to the problems of interpretation facing Badham. Within its rightful context there is no such problem.

It is not enough merely to refute the method which underlies the arguments of Hick and Badham; an alternative way of considering belief must be advanced which, while not destroying the distinctive insights of different belief systems, maintains the empathic approach which Hick and Badham expound.

Both Hick and Badham offer a reformed realism in their approach to religion. God does exist, but religious understandings of him cannot be understood referentially; rather, they are specifically human responses to the experience of the reality which is 'God'. In response, I would like to outline a form of non-realism. Perhaps I should say *reformed* non-realism, because I believe that the critique which Hick gives of the non-realist position underlines the problems of not clearly defining what constitutes such an approach.

Hick's critique of 'non-realism' takes in a wide variety of views and positions. He focuses his critique upon the work of Don Cupitt and D Z Phillips, choices which show the breadth of his definition of 'non-realism'. Cupitt would readily accept his position to be 'non-realist'. He is concerned with religious praxis as a human achievement. There is nothing which gives external meaning to our life; we have to create our values, our own spirituality. God is not an external, existent reality but "a personal religious ideal, internal to the spiritual self"<sup>20</sup>. Phillips' position is quite different. His concern is to return the meaning of religious language to the context in which it is used in the believer's life. He rejects the metaphysical superstructure which is imposed upon such beliefs by philosophical theologians. While he rejects the philosopher's God, he would deny the idea that God is not 'real'. If God is not 'real', the religious life is a non-sense. God is real within the believer's use of religious language, and consequently within the believer's life. It does make a difference whether one believes or does not believe in God.

The connection which Hick makes between these two quite different figures shows that care is needed when describing a position which is concerned to stress the this-worldly nature of belief without recourse to a metaphysical superstructure. I wish to outline such an approach which, while not ignoring the differences between the worldviews of the faiths, will prove beneficial for dialogue.

At the outset, Phillips' claim that God is 'real' must be taken seriously. Hick and Badham assume realists to have the monopoly on such language about God. Yet 'real' in relation to God need not mean that God is an objective existent reality. Rather, God can be described as real in the sense of being the eternal perspective which we put upon life<sup>21</sup>. If such a definition of God is accepted, religious belief need not be considered as an "illusion"<sup>22</sup>; holding a perspective upon life which sets out the possibility of finding lasting, 'eternal' significance in this

world will radically change the way in which one both views and acts within the world. At the same time, discussion of which religion most closely approximates the transcendent reality of God will not arise. If religion is man's response to the eternal in the midst of this life, and not a response to an eternal which is beyond it, then the culturally relative positions held by different groups will not be a problem. Nor does this mean that the soteriological significance of faith cannot be judged, for "by their fruits shall you know them."

When such an approach is applied to the interpretation of religious language, the benefits are clearly seen. The religious language of a given tradition is the distinctive way in which believers express their beliefs. We cannot move, as Badham attempts to do, from religious language and the context in which it is used, to a quasi-scientific position. This is not to say that the language of belief is without a wider context. However, this wider context is found in the way in which the believer subsequently relates to this world, not to some hypothetical next.

Religious language, and the beliefs expressed in this medium, forms a visionary approach to life. By this, I mean that the task of religion is to create ways of looking at the world which both enhance its importance as the sphere of our life while also challenging us to new ways of being. Hick and Badham have become so ensnared by the metaphysical superstructure which they connect with religion that they fail to do justice to the significance of human existence. This leads them to claim that the ideas of the religious faiths, while being different responses to the one reality, are ultimately saying the same thing. The generalising tendency which they manifest apparently arises from their understanding of religious beliefs as pointing beyond themselves to an ultimate reality; within the specific lectures considered, for Hick, this is God, for Badham, the immortality of the soul. Such accounts fail to do justice to the integrity and uniqueness of the different belief systems. It is only when the individual systems are seen as precisely that — individual and unique — that their ideas can be appreciated. It is by considering such concepts within their contexts that such an understanding can be attained. In Wittgenstein's much quoted phrase, it is by leaving things as they are that the philosophy of religion can learn to appreciate the religions. To place religious beliefs outside the context of religious praxis destroys this possibility. A non-realist position of the kind outlined above ensures the importance of considering both the context of belief and the belief itself on its own, unique terms.

#### Footnotes

- 1 Philosophy and Theology Graduate Seminar, 23 October 1989
- 2 Philosophy and Theology Graduate Seminar, 13 November 1989
- 3 As this question forms a large section in his most recent work, the following quotations will be taken from *An Interpretation of Religion* Macmillan 1989 (hereafter, IR.)
- 4 IR p11
- 5 Ibid p375
- 6 Ibid p174
- 7 Ibid p174
- 8 Ibid p174
- 9 Three kinds of non-realism can be identified in the work of Don Cupitt, Stewart Sutherland, and, while the term needs to be significantly qualified, in that of D Z Phillips
- 10 IR op cit p175
- 11 Paul & Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* SPCK (hereafter IE) p122: "One can see Hick's proposal as providing a global approach to the theology of death. It attempts to draw the major speculations about our possible destiny from the philosophical and religious writing of both east and west into a coherent and unified hypothesis".

- 12 Ibid p6
- 13 Ibid pxi
- 14 Ibid p21
- 15 Ibid p78
- 16 Ibid p117
- 17 cf Ibid p117
- 18 Published by W Walters, Swansea; cf p11: "What we have is a confusion which springs from a misunderstanding of the logic of our language, a misunderstanding which has a deep hold on us. These misunderstandings give rise to metaphysics."
- 19 cf IE op cit chapter iv *Doctrinal Support for Belief in a Future Life*
- 20 Cupitt quoted IR op cit p201
- 21 A possible example in Stewart Sutherland's *God, Jesus and Belief* Pt II 'The Eternal in Human Life'
- 22 cf IR op cit p175, cited above