John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis and the Problem of Conflicting Truth-Claims

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Three blind men were touching an elephant. The first blind man was holding the elephant's leg. He said, "I think an elephant is like the truck of a great tree." The second blind man disagreed. While holding the elephant's trunk he said, "I believe an elephant is like a large snake." The third blind man believed they were both wrong. "An elephant is like a great wall," he exclaimed. He was touching the elephant's side. Each blind man was convinced he was right and others were wrong without ever realizing they were all touching the same elephant. Some believe the blind men in this parable represent the major religions of the world, each in contact with the same "elephant" without knowing it.

How is one to view the myriad of religions that exist in the world today? For many years this question has occupied the attention of philosopher John Hick. As a child Hick was taken to church each Sunday but found the services to be quite boring. It was not until he reached college that Hick found himself spiritually searching. During his first year of law school Hick underwent what he described as a religious conversion to Christianity. Hick later wrote, "I became a Christian of a strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind."[1] He decided to enter Christian ministry and joined the Church of England.

Although Hick remained theologically conservative for many years he became increasingly troubled by the implications of his Christian theology for other religions. If what he believed were true, it meant that other religions must (to some degree) be false. In 1967 he moved to Birmingham, England to teach philosophy at the University of Birmingham. At that time Birmingham had large Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities. As Hick met Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, as well as attend services at their places of worship, his thinking began to change. Reflecting on that time in his life, Hick later wrote,

And occasionally attending worship in mosque and synagogue, temple and gurdwara, it was evident that essentially the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church--namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man.[2]

As a result in 1973 Hick called for a paradigm shift in thinking about religion in his book God and the Universe of Faiths. Hick suggested that each of world's religions should be viewed as "different human responses to one divine Reality..."[3] The fullest development of Hick's views can be found in An Interpretation of Religion[4] published fifteen years later. In An Interpretation of Religion Hick presents a comprehensive theory that attempts to explain all religious phenomena. Hick refers to his theory as a "pluralistic hypothesis." Hick's hypothesis is that all religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality.

Hick's hypothesis merits investigation for at least three reasons. First, from discussions with hundreds of college students over the last fifteen years I am convinced that Hick has put into scholarly language what many people intuitively believe--namely, that all religious paths ultimately lead to the same destination. Second, Hick is one of the most articulate and persuasive pluralists in the English-speaking world. Hick is a careful scholar who writes with great clarity and precision. Finally, his hypothesis is one of the most sophisticated formulations of the pluralist position that I have encountered to date.

Any pluralistic theory that claims all religions are manifestations of the same ultimate reality faces an immediate difficulty: the contradictory truth-claims that different religions make. In other words, how can all religions be manifestations of the same ultimate reality when they contradict one another? Hick is well aware of this difficulty and attempts to address it at some length. For his pluralistic view of religion to be plausible, Hick must show that his hypothesis can adequately explain how religious traditions can make conflicting truth-claims while at the same time being authentic manifestations of the same ultimate reality. Furthermore, his hypothesis must be free from internal inconsistency and accurately handle religious phenomena without distorting it.

Thus, the question I wish to consider in this paper is the following: Is Hick's pluralistic hypothesis plausible in light of the conflicting truth-claims of various religions? I will begin by outlining Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Next, I will explain how he deals with conflicting truth-claims. Finally, I will evaluate how successful Hick has been in solving this problem.

**HICK'S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS**

Hick's pluralistic hypothesis attempts to explain four critical factors: (1) the fact that people are inherently religious, (2) the observation that there is substantial diversity in the actual content of religious belief, (3) the assumption that religious belief is not an illusion, and (4) the recognition that almost every religious tradition positively changes its followers' lives.

Since the first two factors are self-evident to most people, Hick begins his discussion with the third factor, the assumption that religious belief is not an illusion. Hick examines two other approaches to understanding religious phenomena that he finds unacceptable: naturalism and absolutism. Naturalism asserts that all religious propositions about an ultimate reality are false. Nature is all that exists. Though Hick acknowledges that the universe can be interpreted from a naturalistic perspective, he does not find plausible the claim that all religious beliefs are delusory.

Hick rejects not only naturalism, but also a close cousin of naturalism, religious non-realism.[5] Non-realists claim that although religious
beliefs may be helpful, they do not denote objects which exist independent of one’s perception. In other words, when Muslims pray five times a day to Allah, they are not praying to something or someone which actually exists independent of their perception.

In contrast, realists claim that, “material objects exist outside us and independently of what we take to be our perceptions of them.”[6] Hick holds a critical realist view of religious phenomena. He believes that the objects of religious belief, with a number of qualifications, do exist independent of one’s perception.

The second approach Hick examines is absolutism. Absolutism, in contrast to naturalism, generally embraces a realist view of religious phenomena. In addition, absolutism maintains that only one system of religious belief is literally true and that other religious systems which disagree are false. Although Hick once held to a form of absolutism he now rejects this approach as well. Hick claims that although absolutism may seem plausible when one focuses only on one’s own tradition, the real world renders it highly implausible. If absolutism were true, Hick suggests, one would expect empirical evidence to confirm it. For example, the true religion would be more efficient at producing saints. But according to Hick, this obviously is not the case. Each religious tradition appears to bring about moral transformation in the lives of its followers.[7]

Having rejected naturalism and absolutism, Hick offers his own position—namely that “the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”[8] At the heart of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is his assertion that an Ultimate Reality, which he calls “the Real”, is the ground of all religious experience.

Yet, how can all religions be experiencing the Real when their conceptions of the Real are diverse and contradictory? Hick resolves this dilemma by borrowing from the thought of Immanuel Kant. Kant, according to Hick, “distinguish[ed] explicitly between an entity as it is in itself and as it appears in perception.”[9] Hick applies Kant’s distinction to religious phenomena and proposes a distinction between the Real an sich (as it actually exists) and the Real as perceived and experienced by individuals in a particular tradition.[10] Therefore, the reason individual religious traditions have conflicting conceptions of the Real is that none has direct access to it. Rather, all perception of the Real is mediated through a unique religious tradition which acts as a “conceptual lens.” This conceptual lens shapes perception of the Real. Putting his hypothesis into a theistic context, Hick proposes, “This suggests that each concrete historical divine personality—Jahweh, the heavenly Father, the Qur’anic Allah—is a joint product of the universal divine presence and a particular historically formed mode of constructive religious imagination.”[11] In other words, religious beliefs come partially from experience of the Real and partially from one’s own imagination.

As a result, Hick proposes that differing conceptions of the Real, as personal or impersonal, are similar to “the two ways of conceiving and registering light, namely as waves and as particles.”[12] In the early part of this century there were two competing schools of thought regarding the nature of light. Some claimed that light consisted of particles and others asserted that light had the properties of waves. Though the two views initially appeared to contradict one another, further research demonstrated that light has the properties of both waves and particles. Thus, Hick claims that in the same way light can legitimately be understood as having the properties of both waves and particles, so the Real can be conceived as both personal and impersonal.[13] This of course raises a critical question: What is the relationship between the Real in itself and the varying conceptions of the Real held by the followers of various traditions?

On the one hand, Hick maintains that Jahweh, the Christian Trinity, and Shiva are “authentic manifestations” of the Real.[14] They are not mere hallucinations. On the other hand, Hick does not believe that these individual conceptions of the Real are “objective existent personal individuals.”[15] Speech then about the Real, according to Hick, tends to be mythological in nature. According to Hick,

This relationship between the ultimate noumenon and its multiple phenomenal appearances, or between the limitless transcendent reality and our many partial human images of it, makes possible mythological speech about the Real. I define 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. Thus the truth of a myth is a practical truthfulness: a true myth is one which rightly guides us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms.[16]

In summary, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis claims the following: (1.) There is one divine reality, the Real, which is the ultimate source of all religious experience. (2.) No religious tradition has direct perception of the Real. (3.) Each religious tradition represents an authentic way in which the Real is conceived and experienced. (4.) The Real transcends all descriptions -- both negative and positive. Hick believes that his theory offers the most plausible explanation for the religious phenomena we are presented.

Before moving to Hick’s treatment of conflicting truth-claims I want to make an important observation about Hick’s hypothesis. To most people it is self-evident that different religious traditions hold irreconcilable beliefs on numerous points. Yet, it seems obvious as well that most every religion brings positive moral change in the lives of its followers. Therefore, many find it implausible to believe that only one religion is true. For a person who holds this perspective, Hick’s hypothesis has a strong intuitive appeal because it provides a framework by which one can claim that any religion which positively transforms its followers’ lives is valid. However, for Hick’s hypothesis to be plausible it must adequately address the problem of conflicting truth-claims. It is to this issue I will now turn my attention.

**PLURALISM AND CONFLICTING TRUTH CLAIMS**

One apparent difficulty Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis faces is reconciling the conflicting belief systems of various religious traditions. Hick notes, “The ‘conflicting truth-claims’ of different religious traditions pose an obvious problem for the pluralistic hypothesis.”[17] Hick claims that all religions authentically experience the Real. Yet, each tradition holds beliefs that contradict the beliefs of other traditions. The question then is: Do differing belief systems and conflicting truth-claims render Hick’s pluralistic theory implausible? Although conflicting truth-claims present a difficulty, Hick does not believe they falsify his theory in the final analysis. Hick writes,

We have to ask concerning these primary affirmations whether they conflict with one another. They conflict in the sense that
Adonai and the Dharmakaya, although phenomenologically utterly different, may nevertheless both stand in their own soteriological traditions are authentic manifestations of the Real. One obvious problem however for this claim is the radically different conceptions of the essence of their faith and accept, further, that we lack sufficient historical evidence definitively to settle most of them. In summary, Hick claims that most historical disagreements can not be resolved. In addition, since many of these disagreements are not related the essence of any tradition, Hick concludes that resolving them is not critical and ultimately they do not create a problem for his pluralistic hypothesis.

Next, Hick considers conflicting trans-historical truth-claims. Hick writes, "For they have to do with questions to which there is in principle a true answer, but one which cannot be established by historical or other empirical evidence." Two notable examples are the nature of the universe (temporal or eternal?) and the fate of human beings at death (one life or many?). Hick examines both of these disagreements. The nature of the universe, claims Hick, has primarily been a dispute between theistic and non-theistic traditions. Hick notes that this is a dispute to which there is, in principle, one valid answer. However, the question can not currently be answered says Hick, even by modern science. Current scientific cosmologies are compatible with either perspective. More importantly, Hick claims that the resolution of this dispute is not necessary for what Hick calls "salvation/liberation."

Accordingly it can hardly be necessary for salvation/liberation, even from a theistic point of view, to know whether the universe is eternal. And so when the Indian religions affirm and the Semitic religions deny its temporal infinity, this is not a dispute affecting the soteriological efficacy of either group of traditions. To believe the universe is or is not eternal cannot significantly help or hinder the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness of Reality-centeredness.

The fate of individuals at death is a second example of conflicting trans-historical truth claims. Often the lines of conflict over this issue are drawn between eastern and western traditions. Eastern traditions emphasize numerous reincarnations or rebirths following death while western theistic religions generally claim that each person lives one life followed by a judgement to determine an eternal fate. Noting the complexity of this issue, Hick proposes the following: First, eastern and western traditions need to dialogue more on this issue--presumably with an openness to modify their beliefs as a result. Second, it is conceivable that some people are reincarnated while others are not. Thus, these perspectives conflict only if applied universally. Third, these beliefs may better be understood mythologically. Finally, and most importantly, Hick claims that correct belief about the after-life is not necessary for salvation/liberation.

But if we ask today: Is belief, or disbelief, in reincarnation essential for salvation/liberation? the answer must surely be No. For unless one holds, as a Hindu or a Buddhist, that there is no transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness among the hundreds of millions who do not share the reincarnation belief or, as a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim, that there is no such transformation among the hundreds of millions who do not hold to that belief, one must accept that the question is not soteriologically vital.

Hick proposes the following general principles in dealing with conflicting trans-historical truth-claims. First, there are true answers to these disputes, but we don't know them. Second, when these beliefs are understood mythologically they present fewer problems. Third, dogmatism on these questions has contributed to racism and imperialism. And finally, belief about the afterlife doesn't affect one's ability to experience salvation/liberation.

These points are important for understanding Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. As Hick examines various religious traditions he does not deny that they disagree, for example, about the nature of the universe or the fate of individuals at death. Yet, despite these differing beliefs, Hick believes that almost every faith helps people develop morally (a necessary consequence of the transition from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness). On this basis, he concludes that these differences do not hinder salvation/liberation and therefore are not problematic for his hypothesis.

The final level of disagreement Hick examines is conflicting beliefs about the ultimate Reality. Hick's hypothesis asserts that all religious traditions are authentic manifestations of the Reality. One obvious problem however for this claim is the radically different conceptions of the Reality each tradition holds. Hick claims, as we have already seen, that each tradition's deity is an authentic face of the Reality. "Thus Adonai and the Dharmakaya, although phenomenologically utterly different, may nevertheless both stand in their own soteriological
Having examined conflicting historical and trans-historical truth-claims as well as differing conceptions of the Real, Hick summarizes,

My conclusion, then, is that the differences between the root concepts and experiences of the different religions, their different and often conflicting historical and trans-historical beliefs, their incommensurable mythologies, and the diverse and ramifying belief systems into which all these are built, are compatible with the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.\(^{[32]}\)

**RELIGION, MYTHOLOGY, AND TRUTH**

In order to properly evaluate the problem conflicting truth-claims create for Hick's pluralistic hypothesis several critical questions must be answered: Do religions make truth-claims? If so, what kind of truth-claims do they make? In what sense do these truth-claims conflict? And finally, do these conflicting truth-claims invalidate Hick's hypothesis?

At first glance it may seem obvious that religions make truth-claims. When Muslims pray to Allah, they believe that they are praying to a supernatural being who exists independent of their perception. Allah, to them, is no mere psychological projection. However, as I have already pointed out, this is no longer considered obvious by a number of scholars.\(^{[33]}\) Some claim that the truth of religion is little more than "art truth," devoid of any ontological status.\(^{[34]}\) In order to determine the kind of claims religious traditions make one must be able to identify the nature of a truth-claim. A thorough discussion of the nature of truth is beyond the scope of this paper. However, since a proper understanding of the nature of truth is crucial to evaluating Hick's hypothesis, I will briefly discuss it below.

Mortimer Adler examines the nature of truth, as it applies to religion, in his book *Truth in Religion* (1990). Adler makes three distinctions about truth which are pertinent to our discussion. First, Adler claims that one must distinguish between what he calls "poetical truth" and "logical truth." The former applies to fictional narratives, plays, and paintings which are not subject to contradiction. The latter, however, "signifies the kind of truth that belongs to propositions or judgements, descriptive or prescriptive, that are subject to contradiction. Such truth, if descriptive, is factual truth, giving us knowledge of the observed phenomena or of reality . . . ."\(^{[35]}\) True propositions, according to Adler, are those which accurately describe a independent reality. "For all who think reality exists independently of the mind and that reality is what it is regardless of how we think about it, the definition of truth is the agreement of thought with reality."\(^{[36]}\)

Second, Adler proposes that one must distinguish between a proposition itself and our judgements about a given proposition. Adler notes, "The truth or falsity of entertained propositions is absolute and immutable. The correctness of the judgements we make about them is relative and mutable."\(^{[37]}\) This distinction helps one avoid the error of claiming that a certain proposition is "true for you but not true for me."

Adler proposes a third distinction which is relevant to our discussion about the nature of truth. The question: "What is truth?" must be distinguished from the question: "How can one ascertain the truthfulness or falsity of a given truth-claim?" Adler believes that this distinction is crucial. One's ability (or inability) to empirically verify a given proposition has no necessary relationship to its truthfulness.\(^{[38]}\) The implication, from Adler's perspective, is that even if certain religious articles of faith are beyond rational or empirical truth, as Adler believes many are, this has no bearing on whether or not they are matters of matters of truth.\(^{[39]}\)

Harold Netland takes a similar approach in his book *Dissonant Voices* (1991). About the nature of truth Netland writes,

To say that truth is propositional, then, is to recognize that although 'true' and 'truth' can be used in a variety of ways, in the logically basic sense truth is a quality or property of propositions. That is, truth is a property of propositions such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which refers is as the proposition asserts it to be; otherwise it is false.\(^{[40]}\)

Netland convincingly argues that an accurate understanding religious phenomena "must include notions of propositional and exclusive truth."\(^{[41]}\) Even the claim that religions do not make truth claims is itself a truth-claim subject to contradiction.

How would Hick respond to the claim that religious traditions do in fact make truth-claims (in the category of logical truth)? Though in principle Hick would agree that religions do make truth-claims, this is a difficult question to answer. Hick's own thinking on this seems to have evolved. In 1973 he published *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Chapter two of this work (entitled "Religion as Fact-Asserting") was, in part, a response to the assertion by logical positivists and non-cognitivists that religious language does not contain meaningful propositions. Hick accepted the assumptions of the positivists and showed that, even on their own criteria, religious language does involve meaningful fact assertions. At that time, Hick was especially critical of those who claimed that the truthfulness of a religion is unimportant and that all that mattered was a religion's usefulness. Hick perceptively noted that, "The utility of religion did not need to be asserted until the arguments for its truth had in great measure ceased to convince."\(^{[42]}\)

At that time Hick was convinced that religious beliefs involved fact-assertions -- logical truth, as Adler calls it. In fact, he claimed, "it is vitally important to maintain the genuinely factual character of the central affirmations of the Christian faith . . . ."\(^{[43]}\) Though Hick also believed, even at that time, that religious language also involved "myth," statements which have important religious value without being literally true, he concluded that Christianity could not retain its identity in any meaningful way unless the "factual character" of its basic assertions were insisted upon.\(^{[44]}\) Hick's thinking about this appears to have shifted considerably. Today Hick holds very few, if any, of the basic assertions of Christianity to be factual.\(^{[45]}\)
An example of Hick's more recent thought is found in *Interpretation of Religion*. Hick distinguishes between what he calls "literal" and "mythological" truth. Hick's definition of literal truth is the same as Adler's notion of logical truth (involving correspondence to reality). About mythological truth Hick writes, "A statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke a proper dispositional response to X."[46] The (alleged) fall of Adam and Eve is one example of what Hick would consider a mythological truth. While it was not a historical event, the story does have an important religious value.[47]

This inevitably raises the question, How does one distinguish between myth and literal truth? Hick writes, "Thus the pluralistic hypothesis suggests that a number of trans-historical beliefs, . . . may well be true or false myths rather than true or false factual assertions."[48] Hick claims that his hypothesis does not necessarily prescribe which beliefs are to be considered mythological. Yet, he immediately adds one qualification:

> The only exception are those that declare one particular tradition to be alone soteriologically effective: our pluralistic hypothesis holds that whilst such beliefs may in a particular phase of history be mythologically true for the particular group whose religious life they support, they do not have the literal truth that would constitute them true for everyone.[49]

In other words Hick claims that any religious belief that would conflict with, and if literally true, falsify another religious belief, must be treated mythologically.

This betrays an inconsistency in Hick's hypothesis. The more he is pressed with the problem of conflicting truth-claims the more he appears to interpret religious beliefs mythologically to avoid potential contradiction. However, this move carries with it a high cost. If Hick treats most religious beliefs as mythological how can he still be a realist (even of a critical variety)? Realists, as I previously noted, claim that objects of perception exist independent of our perception of them. My criticism of Hick is not directed toward his claim that religious language sometimes involves non-literal or metaphorical elements. Certainly this is the case. Rather, my objection is to the way in which he utilizes mythology. Many beliefs that would be understood as logical fact assertions by adherents of a particular religion (the existence of God for example by Muslims), are reinterpreted mythologically by Hick.

If Hick's mythological interpretation of religious phenomena does represent a substantive shift away from a realist view of religious phenomena, as it appears to, this raises another critical question: In what sense does Hick really differ from D. Z. Philipps and Don Cupitt who claim that religious language does not refer to independently existing objective reality?[50] In the face of conflicting truth claims, I do not believe that Hick can maintain, on one hand, a realist view of religious phenomena (which of necessity presumes that religions make fact-assertions) and his pluralistic theory of religions on the other. Hick wants to have it both ways: holding to realism and his pluralistic hypothesis at the same time.

One example of this can be found in his discussion of the relationship between the Real and its personae and impersonae. On one hand, he wants to maintain that various conceptions of the Real are "authentic faces" of the Real. On the other hand, Hick does not want to claim that these faces are literally true descriptions of the Real. Rather they are mythologically true. Hick appears to be a realist about the Real and a non-realist about the personae and impersonae of the Real.

In summary, Hick's use of myth to soften the conflicts between religious traditions is like a doctor sawing off a patient's arm to stop the blood-flow from a bleeding finger. It solves the problem, but only at a very high cost.

This brings me to second difficulty with Hick's hypothesis--its revisionist nature. In order to make his hypothesis work, Hick must redefine many religious concepts in ways the founders and adherents of various traditions would reject. Perhaps the best example of this is Hick's concept of salvation/liberation. Salvation/liberation involves the transformation of individuals from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness.[51] According to Hick every religion has some notion of salvation/liberation. Certainly most traditions have, as a category, notions of salvation or liberation, but it is a big jump to claim that because most religions have a common category, that their beliefs must be similar. Hick would, in principle, deny that this is what he is doing. However, in reality, he does appear to do this. Hick, for example, claims that,

> There are, first, important ideas within the different traditions which on the surface present incompatible alternatives but which can be seen on deeper analysis to be different expressions of the same more fundamental idea: thus the Christian concept of salvation and the Hindu and Buddhist concepts of liberation are expressions of the more basic notion of the realization of a limitlessly better possibility for human existence.[52] (italics mine)

"Deeper analysis" is the key phrase. I suspect it is actually be a euphemism for revisionism. The Buddhist concept of liberation by achieving Nirvana is radically different from the Christian concept salvation involving personal, bodily existence in heaven in the presence of a Triune God. Though Hick may be right--that both these understandings may involve the realization of a greater possibility for human existence--the way in which these two traditions believe this will be realized is completely different. In addition, Hick's definition of salvation/liberation is very temporal in its focus. This too is revisionist. The Christian concept of salvation clearly refers to a life beyond the grave. The same is true for Islam and many other traditions.

The result of this revisionism is that one wonders whether religions actually make any meaningful truth-claims. Though in principle he affirms that religions make truth-claims, his extensive use of revisionist mythology represents a denial of this belief in practice. Hick claims that mythologically true beliefs have value because they evoke a proper "dispositional response" to the Real. In other words, the main value of religious belief is practical. Yet, this is precisely what Hick rejected in 1973. Hick wrote, "I claimed that religion is concerned with reality and that its central affirmations are, ultimately, true or false factual assertions. In this chapter I want to criticize the opposite view, both in the crude assumption that the important question is not whether religious affirmations are true but whether they are useful . . ."[53]
HICK'S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS AND CONFLICTING TRUTH-CLAIMS: COMPATIBLE OR CONTRADICTORY?

Before I respond to Hick's treatment of conflicting truth-claims I would like to make an additional point about the nature of truth. One of the most basic notions of logic is the principle of non-contradiction. If a given proposition (P) is true, then its opposite, not (P), can not be true at the same time. Consider the following statements:

- In 1989 the University of Michigan won the NCAA championship in basketball.
- In 1989 the University of Michigan did not win the NCAA championship in basketball.

It is self-evident that both these statements cannot be true at the same time. In fact, all matters of truth are subject to contradiction. Thus, any truth-claim must either be true or false. This claim follows from the principle of excluded middle. If religions make truth-claims, as I have proposed that they do, then religious claims are, by definition, subject to contradiction. This means that if two religions make contradictory truth-claims, they can not both be correct. One of the basic beliefs of Islam is that there is only one God, Allah. Muhammad rejected polytheism. If Muhammad's claim is correct, then Hindus who claim that there are many gods can not be correct—or vice versa. It should be clear that if religions make truth-claims, and these truth-claims contradict claims made by other religions, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis becomes highly implausible.

Having noted this, I would like to evaluate Hick's attempt to rescue his hypothesis from the problem of conflicting truth-claims. First, Hick repeatedly begs the question in his discussion of conflicting truth-claims. The critical question is this: Do conflicting truth-claims render his pluralistic hypothesis implausible? Hick's discussion repeatedly avoids addressing this question. About historical differences Hick claims that, "we lack sufficient evidence definitively to settle most of them." Hick believes that because these disputes can not be settled, that conflicting (historical) truth-claims do not invalidate his hypothesis. Hick takes a similar approach in his discussion of conflicting trans-historical truth-claims. He claims that contradicting trans-historical truth-claims are in fact "unanswered questions"—questions which have a true answer, but can not be settled historically or empirically. Hick asserts that we really don't know whether the universe is temporal or eternal, nor do we know anything definitively about the fate of individuals at death.

The assumption behind this seems to be that because these conflicts can not be resolved (a premise I shall presently consider), then the fact that they conflict is not a problem. Yet this totally dodges the question. Even if one were to grant Hick's premise (that opposing truth-claims can not be adjudicated), this doesn't succeed in rescuing Hick's hypothesis. If two religions make contradictory claims, one of them is, by definition, wrong based on the law of non-contradiction. The fact that one can not fully determine which belief is correct doesn't soften the contradiction. Mortimer Adler persuasively argues this point.

The point to be stressed here is that if articles of faith, which are unprovable, have truth in the same sense as the testable and provable conclusions of historical research, science, and philosophy, then the fact that they lie beyond proof by empirical evidence and rational argument does not mean that they are exempt from being subject to the logic of truth. When articles of faith are incompatible with one another, both cannot be judged correctly to be true, though both may be false.

Hick's discussion of the fate of individuals at death is perhaps the most significant example of question-begging. Hick proposes that Semitic traditions, like Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, should give greater consideration to reincarnation, presumably with a willingness to modify their position. While this may resolve the conflict, it completely evades the issue. The point is that eastern and western traditions hold conflicting conceptions of the after-life. Hick also proposes that Hindus might come to treat their beliefs as mythological. This too begs the question. Most Hindus do believe that individuals are reincarnated. Hick also proposes that perhaps some people are reincarnated while others live once and then face judgement. While this is possible, it does not accurately reflect what these traditions believe. It too begs the question.

A final example of avoiding the real issue is Hick's claim that resolving the fate of individuals at death is not necessary for salvation/liberation. Hick writes, "But if we ask: Is belief, or disbelief, in reincarnation essential for salvation/liberation? the answer must surely be No." Hick's bottom line. We have already seen that one of the key pieces of evidence which allegedly supports Hick's hypothesis is the fact that all religions effect a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. According to Hick, each faith is bringing salvation/liberation despite holding beliefs which conflict other traditions. As a result, Hick claims that conflicting truth-claims are not a problem for his hypothesis.

Does this solve the problem? It does not. First, it should be pointed out that Hick's assertion that salvation/liberation is happening in all traditions, is itself a truth-claim subject to contradiction. Hick can not avoid the issue of truth. Second, and more importantly, this move by Hick would work only if salvation/liberation is limited to some degree of moral transformation in this life. But is salvation/liberation really understood this way by Buddhists, Hindus, Muslim, Jews, or Christians? Clearly it is not.

Hick claims that what one believes about the after life doesn't affect one's experience of salvation/liberation. Yet, this clearly conflicts with the data of almost every religion. How does Hick know that belief doesn't affect salvation/liberation? Salvation, as understood by Christians involves eternity in the presence of God instead of eternity in hell. Proper belief is necessary to experience this. When the claims of various religious traditions are taken on their own grounds, Hick's claim that all traditions equally effect salvation/liberation is revisionist and implausible.
Not only is does Hick's discussion of conflicting truth-claims repeatedly beg the question, but Hick's emphatic assertion that conflicting truth-claims cannot be resolved represents an implicit denial that there are rational criteria by which these conflicts could be resolved. Hick claims that Christians and Muslims debate the nature of Jesus' death. [64] Christians claim he died on a cross and Muslims deny this. This example, and others, leaves one with the impression that the evidence for each side is about equal. Yet, the evidence supporting the claim by Christians that Christ died on a cross is clearly decisive. [65]

Hick is equally agnostic about our ability to resolve most conflicting trans-historical truth-claims. Hick's definition of trans-historical truth-claims suggests not only that such disputes have not yet been resolved, but seems to imply they never will be. [66] Hick admits, regarding the nature of the universe that, "Scientific cosmology may perhaps one day be able to settle the question. . . . At the moment the evidence, hinging upon the total volume of matter, is insufficient to determine whether the universe is `open' or `closed'." [67] According to Hick, the scientific evidence is ambiguous as to whether the universe had a beginning. This assertion is clearly a questionable. There is solid empirical evidence to suggest that the universe did have a beginning. [68]

But more importantly, Hick's agnosticism serves an essential purpose. It avoids potential contradiction at every turn. If scientific evidence supported the fact that the universe had a beginning this would contradict, and potentially falsify, the claim by many eastern traditions that the universe is beginningless which is precisely what Hick wants to avoid. Hick's claim that such disputes can not be resolved is driven by an assumption which is forced on the data. In his fervor to avoid contradiction, he even seems to imply that a truth-claim established empirically can not falsify a religious belief. "However even if scientific cosmology should come to a definitive conclusion concerning the uniqueness or otherwise of the big bang this would not settle any religious issue." [69]

If Hick does believe that scientific evidence cannot support or deny an article of religious belief, this would seem to support my earlier contention that Hick, when push comes to shove, denies on a practical level that religions make truth-claims. The problem is all too clear. If religions do make truth-claims, these claims could be contradicted (or supported) by truth-claims established in other fields such as science. [70]

Hick's response to this would probably be two-fold. First, he would point out that even within the Christianity, accurate belief about the nature of universe is not necessary for salvation. This is true, but misses the point. Certainly there are beliefs Christians hold which are not necessary to believe in order to experience salvation from a Christian perspective. However, the point is that there are some beliefs one must hold (in this case regarding one's condition before God and the person of Jesus Christ) in order to experience Christian salvation.

Second, I believe Hick would concede that scientific evidence could falsify a religious belief but maintain that vast majority of religious claims could never be validated by scientific study. Such a move, however, entails a tacit admission that there are tradition-independent criteria by which religious beliefs can be rationally evaluated. Yet, this is precisely what he wants to avoid. Hick's agnostic dogmatism is an implicit denial that there are any rational criteria by which conflicting religious beliefs could, at least in principle, be evaluated.

Other scholars would disagree with Hick's claim that there are no tradition-independent criteria by which religious traditions can be evaluated. [71] Harold Netland, for example, believes that there are at least six such criteria. These include basic principles of logic, recognizing self-defeating statements, coherence, ability to adequately explain all the data, consistency with other fields of knowledge like history and science, and moral considerations. [72] These criteria are used regularly in science, history, and philosophy to evaluate various theories and world-views. In light of this, Hick's agnosticism about our ability to resolve conflicting truth-claims is unwarranted.

In my examination of how Hick's pluralistic hypothesis handles the problem of conflicting truth-claims, I have proposed the following: First, I claimed that Hick faces a serious internal inconsistency. He cannot, in the presence of conflicting truth-claims, hold a realist view of religious phenomena and his hypothesis at the same time. Second, I pointed out that his pluralistic hypothesis distorts the religious data (in this case truth-claims) by reinterpretating it to make his theory work. This reinterpretation is accomplished by the extensive use of mythology which denies that religions make logical truth-claims. Third, I stated that Hick repeatedly begs the question in his discussion of conflicting truth-claims. He changes the question from, "Do conflicting truth-claims tend to falsify a pluralistic hypothesis?" to "Does any religion really accomplish salvation/liberation more effectively?" This evades the real issue. Fourth, I claimed that Hick's dogmatic assertion that conflicting truth-claims can not be resolved represents an (unwarranted) denial that there are rational criteria by which religious world-views can be evaluated.

CONCLUSION

Does Hick's hypothesis offer an adequate solution to the problem of the conflicting truth-claims of various religions? I believe that it does not. Earlier I claimed that in order for Hick's hypothesis to be plausible it must be free from internal contradictions and accurately describe religious phenomena. As I have shown, it can not sufficiently satisfy either of these criteria.

This paper began with the story about three blind men who were trying to describe an elephant. The first blind man was holding onto the elephant's leg. He said, "I think an elephant is like the truck of a great tree." The second blind man disagreed. While holding the elephant's trunk he said, "I believe an elephant is like a large snake." The third blind man believed they were both wrong. "An elephant is like a great wall," he exclaimed. He was touching the elephant's side. This parable is a greatly simplified version of Hick's hypothesis. Hick believes that each religious tradition is like a blind man who, suffering from a Kantian blindness, is unable to see the elephant as it really is.

Yet, how do we know these blind men were all describing the same elephant? What if the first blind man, while holding an oak tree said, "I think an elephant is like the truck of a great tree." Then imagine the second blind man, who was actually holding a fire hose claimed, "No, I believe an elephant is like a snake." What if the third blind man, while touching the side of the Sear's Tower in downtown Chicago
assumed, "I think you are both wrong; an elephant is like a great wall." This story has a critical flaw—it assumes the very thing it allegedly proves—namely, that all three blind men were touching an elephant.

Furthermore, the situation depicted in this parable does not really describe the worlds religions. None of blind men's descriptions were contradictory. They were merely different. But what if each of the blind men made statements about an (alleged) elephant which actually contradicted the claims of the others? Would it still be plausible to believe they are all describing the same elephant? How much contradiction would be required in their accounts before it would become obvious that they were not describing the same elephant? A similar question can be asked of Hick's hypothesis. In light of the conflicting truth-claims of various religions make, is it really plausible to accept Hick's claim that all religions are manifestations of the same ultimate reality?

In a chapter in *Disputed Questions* entitled "Jews, Christians, Muslims: Do We All Worship the Same God?" Hick evaluates the plausibility of the claim that all religions worship the same God and merely refer to him by different names. Noting that the difficulty with this position is that the various descriptions must be compatible, Hick writes, "And so it does not seem sufficient simply to say that the same identical God is being named and described differently. The differences between these describable divine personalities go too deep for that to be plausible."[73] I believe the same criticism Hick leveled against this position can be applied to Hick's hypothesis. Even with Hick's distinction between the Real an sich and the Real as humanly conceived, the differences between religious traditions are far too deep to render his hypothesis plausible.

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Keith E. Johnson is a graduate of the University of Michigan (B.S. in Chemical Engineering) and Trinity International University (M.A. in Christian Thought). Keith speaks frequently on religious pluralism and comparative religions on university campuses. He currently serves as the Regional Coordinator on Ongoing Theological Education with the Campus Ministry of CCC and lives in Indianapolis.

**ENDNOTES**

2. Ibid., *God Has Many Names*, 5
3. Ibid., 6.
7. Ibid., 307.
8. Ibid., 235-336.
9. Ibid., 241.
10. Ibid., 236.
13. Ibid., 245.
15. Hick, *Interpretation*, 273. One possibility Hick is comfortable with is what he refers to as a "veridical hallucination."
16. Ibid., 248.
17. Ibid., 362.
18. Ibid., 373.
19. Hick has also addressed the problem of conflicting truth-claims in his book *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 88-95. This chapter is primary a response to an article by Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis in which they were critical of Hick's treatment of conflicting truth-claims. "On Grading Religions and Being Nice to People." Religious Studies 19 (1983), 75-80. Since it was written four years before *Interpretation of Religion* and it fully represented in the latter work I have confined my interaction with Hick to this work. Hick also addresses this issue in *Disputed Questions* (New Haven: Yale, 1993).
22. Ibid., 365.
23. Ibid., 365.
24. Ibid., 365.
25. Ibid., 366.
27. Ibid., 368-69.
28. Ibid., 370.
29. Ibid., 374.
30. Ibid., 374.
31. Ibid., 350.
32. Ibid., 375-76.
33. Examples would include Ludwig Fuerbach, R. B. Braithwaite, George Sayayana, D. Z. Philippus, and Don Cupitt. Hick critiques their non-realist views in chapter twelve of *Interpretation of Religion*, 190-209.
34. Don Cupitt, for example, argues for this in his article "The Death of Truth," *New Statesman* (April 5, 1991): 23-24. Cupitt's maintains that claims of "absolute truth" for religious doctrines have fueled decades of religious censorship. "The faiths will therefore only give up their impulse to censor threatening ideas if they instead accept that the kind of truth that they can claim is more like the truth of are. Art's truth is, as they say, 'deep'; but it is confessedly metaphorical and doesn't make exclusive claims."
37. Ibid., 12.
38. Ibid., 21.
39. Ibid., 19-20.
41. Ibid., 113.
Hick would point out the he differs from Cupitt and Philipps in that he believes that the Real has ontological existence. Philipps and Cupitt, on the other hand, would not accept Hick’s claim that the Real has ontological existence. Hick appears to be a realist only with regard to the Real. With regard to all other religious phenomena he appears to be a non-realistic.

Hick, Interpretation, 36.

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