CONTRA HICK: EPISTEMOLOGY OF FAITH AND BELIEF
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Abstract

Modern societies are for the most part pluralistic in their compositions and world views. As such, we are given a variety of possibilities to embrace in our everyday lives and social interactions. The plethora of religious choice is a prime example of societal pluralism. John Hick is an eminent proponent of religious pluralism. His adoption of the religious pluralist stance arises from his experience and observations of various religions and their practices wherein he has noted similarities in the development of moral individuals in spite of vastly different and exclusive truth claims made by their religious systems. Hick, in a huge leap of faith, believes these similarities among such great differences must indicate a unitary source of revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality to humankind sometime during the great Axial Age of human development more than two thousand years ago.

Religious pluralism, in its Hickean formulation, is a call for individuals to not only abandon their religions' claims to exclusive truth about the Transcendent Ultimate Reality but also to reduce religious dogmas to their essential elements and modify them in order to preclude contradictory assertions that would exclude other religious systems. The benefits would be to reduce or eliminate religious intolerance and claims to superiority; incidents of religious violence should also be expected to decrease.

This thesis critically examines Hick's thesis and finds that religion has a greater role to play in individual lives than Hick acknowledges. For those with weakly held religious beliefs, the call to religious pluralism may find appeal. However, for those with strongly held religious views, operating within religious structures that serve their needs and eschatological hopes, the adoption of religious pluralism of the Hickean variety may cause them to abandon something that is working well for them without replacing it with something of equal benefit. In the final analysis, I find Hick's call to embrace religious pluralism to be unpersuasive since it is not in itself a religious system; it is, rather, a philosophical system which attempts to address the epistemological challenges associated with the myriad systems of faith and belief found within the great world religions.

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to family and friends who have, over the years, patiently endured my distraction with both the work and the subject. I further dedicate this to Rhonda who is a constant reminder to me that people, as well as the many and varied religions of the world, are also unique and special.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion has been an integral part of human life in some form or other since the earliest human societies arose. It defines and influences the development of human relationships when it comprises the framework within which societies and cultures arise and develop. Religion is often inseparable from society itself. It is, therefore, not surprising that a religion's dogmas or prescriptions for beliefs and behaviour are manifested in how its followers see each other and in how they interrelate with other societies. The form, or tone, of that relationship is certainly influenced by what a religion tells its adherents about themselves and what it tells them about others as well.

To a great extent, holders of religious views believe that their religions originate from an Ultimate Reality which chose to impart some knowledge of itself to their forebears for a specific purpose. That purpose might have been simply a revelation of the existence of the Ultimate Reality itself, or it may have been for the purpose of instruction, or even to identify them as beings who are the responsibility of the Ultimate Reality. If that is the case, and working under the assumption that there is only one source of Ultimate Reality, or revelation, available to humanity, one is compelled to wonder why, over the course of several millennia of human history, concepts of the Ultimate Reality have become so varied—varied often to the degree of mutual exclusion. Without addressing this question immediately, it is readily apparent, that the dogmatic truth claims of many religions often contain *truths* that are mutually exclusive of claims made by other religions, and these truths change and evolve as religious leaders have attempted to apply their understanding of the Ultimate Reality to the world developing around them.

The diversity of religions and religious truths seems to be almost limitless and ever increasing, with new religions being spawned from those already existing. While some new religions bear remarkable similarity to older forms, some religious innovators have truly been quite creative. And some systems of religion have evolved to the extent that they are mere shadows of their original forms. The sheer magnitude of religious offerings, teachings, and dogmas has dramatically impacted most societies throughout history. Unfortunately, religions have not just positively impacted moral and ethical systems. They have also negatively impacted human history when they have been the instigators or rationales behind much of the world's conflict and strife. Religion, when it is used to support one group over another, has legitimized untold acts of savagery and brutality. Individuals, under the guise of *chosen people* or *holy warriors*, have justified their actions by the truth claims that their religions make.

While the foregoing focuses on the extreme effects of religion, we must also be aware that many societies no longer function under one guiding or directing religion that must be held by all their members. Certainly, there are some countries with a mandatory national religion, but even most of these recognize and perhaps tolerate the presence of other religions. Indeed, most liberal nations recognize a plurality of religions alongside a plurality of other views, beliefs, and persuasions. Throughout this thesis I will deem pluralism to be, in the words of Schubert Ogden, "not simply the state or condition of plurality, but the belief or doctrine that affirms and advocates plurality as a good thing (cf. Ogden 1983)."[1] Religious pluralism is but one of a variety of categories assigned to the study of religious forms. A brief synopsis of the main categories of study is given by Gavin D'Costa: "The basic orientation of the pluralist is to affirm the great religious traditions as valid and different paths to salvation. Exclusivists, by contrast, believe that only one religion or

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[1] Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 4 (hereafter cited as *Religion*).

revelation is true and that the others are false, while Christian inclusivists allow for salvation within other religions but relate this salvific grace to the Christ event in a representative or causative fashion."[2] This thesis will examine problems with John Hick's version of the *pluralistic hypothesis* as well as difficulties and implications for exclusivists. The inclusivist position will not be addressed due to length limitations.

What I will refer to as *soft religious pluralism* recognizes, at a minimum, that other religions are validly held by individuals, even though they may have mutually exclusive truth claims. For instance,

> Professor Diana Eck, Chairman of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University describes what she terms the new "geo-religious reality":
>
> *Our religious traditions are not boxes of goods passed intact from generation to generation, but rather rivers of faith—alive, dynamic, ever-changing, diverging, converging, drying up here, and watering new lands there.*
>
> *We are all neighbors somewhere, minorities somewhere, majorities somewhere. This is our new geo-religious reality. There a2re mosques in the Bible Belt in Houston, just as there are Christian churches in Muslim Pakistan. There are Cambodian Buddhists in Boston, Hindus in Moscow, Sikhs in London.*[3]

Here we see both an acknowledgment of religious diversity and a sense of globalization alongside change and evolvement in the religious landscape. This form of religious pluralism allows tolerance and at the same time dialogue, and even disagreement without questioning any truth claims. The following example of this cosmopolitan view of religious difference comes from

> Raimundo Panikkar, a Catholic/Hindu/Buddhist doctor of science, philosophy, and theology, [who] has written extensively on this subject. He speaks of "concordant discord":
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> *We realize that, by my pushing in one direction and your pushing in the opposite, world order is maintained and given the impulse of its proper dynamism . . . One animus does not mean one single theory, one single opinion, but one aspiration (in the literal sense of one breath) and one inspiration (as one spirit). Consensus ultimately means to walk in the same direction, not to have just one rational view. . . . To reach agreement suggests to be agreeable, to be pleasant, to find pleasure in being together. Concord is to put our hearts together.*[4]

It would seem that soft religious pluralism is quite capable of sustaining certain amounts of "discord" without negating the possibility of religious harmony and cooperation, while at the same time allowing the individual to continue to practice his or her traditionally held religious beliefs.

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[2] Gavin D'Costa, "John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution," in Harold Hewitt, Jr., ed. *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 3 (hereafter cited as *Problems*).

[3] Diana Eck, "A New Geo-Religious Reality," in Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions,* 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1991), 422-3.

[4] Raimundo Panikkar "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?" in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion,* ed. Leonard Swidler, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987) in ibid., 427.

From an epistemological viewpoint, established tenets of faith in the existence of an Ultimate Reality and belief in its attributes and influence in one's life, long held by many adherents, can survive in a pluralistic world or society. That is to say, many different beliefs can be held, that are exclusive of those of others, without preventing dialogue and harmonious interactions between differing religious bodies.

But full blown religious pluralism, what I will refer to as *hard religious pluralism*, asks much more of its supporters. It not only asks them to step out of their parochial views of exclusive truth claims, but it asks them to search for a unitary source of divine revelation that underpins all of the claims made by the great world religions, even those that are exceedingly divergent or contradictory. Additionally, the Hickean version requires that those dogmatic claims that are mutually exclusive be reduced to more basic elements and then revised or reinterpreted as myth or as a problem of language. For instance, the divinity of Christ must be abandoned or reinterpreted to mean that he leads us to God without actually being God himself.

Many have promulgated the concept of hard religious pluralism, and one of its ardent supporters, John Hick, has argued persuasively for the need to recognize this growing phenomenon in religious development.[5] Hick's theories of religion have arisen from his personal views of the Ultimate Reality. In the early stage of his spiritual growth Hick developed "a rather strong sense of the reality of God as the personal and loving lord of the universe, and of life as having meaning within God's purpose." This realization eventually led him to "bec[o]me a Christian of a strong evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind."[6] This preliminary stage of his religious development was likely exclusivist in that the fundamentalist position usually excludes not only other religions but often other Christian views that do not lie along the strict interpretation of scriptures that fundamentalists hold dear and as guiding principles of divine truth and knowledge imparted only to those who have been their recipients. Hick's religious development later led him to ordination in the Presbyterian Church of England. Within this dimension of his religiosity it is doubtful Hick would have progressed in his development of religious pluralism, but he moved to Birmingham in 1967 where he was exposed to a wide variety of diverse religious communities and beliefs. In addition, he spent most of a year in India and Sri Lanka studying Hinduism and Buddhism.[7]

Attending religious services, and coming to know individuals in various faiths, aroused a sense of wonder in Hick because he saw that they all held just as strong beliefs in their traditions as

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[5] What is unique about Hick's approach to religious pluralism is its cross-disciplinary flavour. This is especially noticeable in his later work. According to Chester Gillis, commenting on *An Interpretation of Religion*,: "It is a balanced, well-chosen and well-thought-out presentation of religion across the broad spectrum of religious enterprise. Further, the marshalling of insights from various disciplines (and anthropology could be included with philosophy, theology and history of religions) is masterfully done." Chester Gillis, "An Interpretation of *An Interpretation of Religion*," in Hewitt, *Problems,* 32. I would also add that Hick incorporates a certain degree of the sociology of religion in his work. This cross-discipline content will require some similar approaches in my review of Hick and his views of pluralism.

[6] John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982)*,* 14 (hereafter cited as *Names*).

[7] Ibid., 17-18.

he did in his own; individuals of high moral character,[8] also hoping for salvation or liberation, abounded outside of the Christian faith. All of this awareness was played out within the spectrum of the *mutually* exclusive truth claims that these religions made about themselves.[9] It therefore seemed improbable that any one religion could claim absolute truth for itself without at the same time denying it to others. While holding to exclusive truth claims, this situation of harmonious and productive religious experiences is paradoxical at best and threatening to religion at worst. How can they all claim to be the truth, which is manifested in good works and character in their adherents, and yet teach and believe contradictory or exclusive things about themselves or others?[10]

In support of his thesis, Hick and others have questioned the diverse development of mutually exclusive religious truth claims by drawing attention to the common historical time frame in which the major world religions first arose. This "axial age" spawned great innovations in religious thought. Hick has argued for a single source of revelation, an Ultimate Reality who made different iterations of the same message to a number of scattered civilizations at about the same period of time. Thus, according to his position, a single truth emanated from a single source in the distant past almost simultaneously in a number of locations. This truth was then taken by each receiving civilization and developed, originally in isolation, by its members down through history. The result was that, through time and cultural influences, variations crept into the truth received from the Ultimate Reality, and we are faced today with mutually exclusive truth claims about what is essentially a unitary revelation once given to a variety of human groups. We are arguing over the same thing from different viewpoints that seem to condemn others' views as wrong, heretical, or even evil, while at the same time maintaining the orthodoxy, and superiority, of our own beliefs about that truth. Hick states his position as follows:

> At this point we have to take note of the problem posed by the plurality of religious traditions. Having argued for the rationality of religious belief and practice on the basis of the acceptance of religious experience as genuine contact with the transcendent reality, we are faced with the very diverse, and apparently conflicting, beliefs and practices of the various traditions. The basic hypothesis which suggests itself is that the different streams of religious experience represent diverse awarenesses of the same transcendent reality, which is perceived in characteristically different ways by different human mentalities, formed by and forming different

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[8] Unlike Hick, we must not equate our concepts of developing morality as something that is aspired to in all religious systems. For instance, not all Buddhist schools would embrace moral development as a key to liberation. I am grateful to Dr. Ulrich Teucher for raising this point with me.

[9] This stage of awareness is an example of soft religious pluralism. Religious adherents can maintain their own uniqueness while at the same time appreciating the uniqueness of others' religious beliefs and the character-building results they exhibit.

[10] While Hick has many supporters, his detractors have often focused on his Kantian heritage and charges of relativism have been made against him. The most notorious charge of relativism stems from then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in *Dominus Iesus* wherein Hick and others were condemned for their stances. For a close examination of Hick on this charge and the conclusion that he is not a "rampant" relativist see: Carolina Weening, *Whose Truth? Which Rationality? John Hick's Pluralist Strategies for the Management of Conflicting Truth Claims among the World Religions* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2008), 161-162 (hereafter cited as *Whose Truth?*).

cultural histories.[11]

Hick hopes that the acknowledgment of the possibility of a single source of revelation will persuade holders of religious views to look past dogmatic developments in order to see the unity of religious truth's origins and perhaps even to contemplate the possibility that there is a single kernel of truth from which all of their religious views have sprung. Having done so, he expects that many differences will be swept aside and be replaced by harmonious religious experiences which will promote an increase in religious cooperation and allow fewer religious animosities.[12]

That being the case, hard religious pluralism offers the possibility of setting aside religious differences. This should resonate well with anyone serious about world affairs and the disruptions that religion causes or supports. And, from an epistemological viewpoint, those holding religious beliefs should be concerned if their beliefs are found to be based on false assumptions. Additionally, if they could be convinced that they have more in common with other believers than they previously thought, or, conversely, that others' beliefs are not really all that different but simply bring their own uniqueness to the table of religious dialogue, great strides will be made to reduce animosities and claims of falsity against the religions of others. Human harmony would be a net winner in this revision of historical exclusivism, so common among adherents of religious beliefs. But would such harmony exact a price from individuals when long and firmly held beliefs about their religions' veracity and dogmas are called into question, when beliefs must be set aside in the name of re-examining, or reconstructing, what makes their particular religions unique?

This question of the cost of accepting the hard pluralistic viewpoint, especially the Hickean thesis of a common source of revelation, raises a number of interesting epistemological problems. These problems deal with the subjects of faith and belief in the philosophy of religion. While Hick searches for a grand theory that will explain many or most religious divergences that challenge the credibility of religious belief and how individuals can maintain faith in the efficacy of their religious systems, this thesis proposes to examine religious truth claims within the context of the individual, who may or may not hold strong religious beliefs. What I will examine is the value that religion

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[11] John Hick, "Sketch for a Global Theory of Religious Knowledge," in *Names*, 82-83.

[12] Hick is, of course, not the only proponent of the pluralistic hypothesis. S. Mark Heim notes that "John Hick, W.C. Smith, and Paul Knitter offer what I take to be among the most extensive and cogent examples. . . . In Hick's case pluralistic theology is cast in a primarily philosophical form, while Smith argues mainly in historical terms and Knitter in ethical ones." S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 14-15.

The diversity of those who promote pluralism can be seen in Hick's own words on the dedication page of his *Problems of Religious Pluralism*: "To friends who are prophets of religious pluralism within their several traditions

Masao Abe within Buddhism,
Hasan Askari within Islam,
Ramchandra Gandhi within Hinduism,
Kushdeva Singh within Sikhism,
Wilfred Cantwell Smith, within Christianity,
and Leo Trepp within Judaism"

John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1985).

potentially holds for various individuals and what might be expected to change for them when they are summoned to answer the challenges posed by Hick's hard religious pluralism. These responses will be seen to vary according to the epistemic position of the individual and his or her religious world view. Throughout the course of this examination, I try to remain outside of any contextual position in order to cast what I hope will be an impartial framework over the discussion. Nevertheless I will conclude that not all available religious world views are viable for the sincere religious believer who holds a particular religious belief.

That being said, faith and belief will be examined in due course, but the initial epistemological questions for the reader that arise are threefold: 1) Am I open to the possibility that other religions contain some truth, or, conversely, can I accept that my own religion does not have the whole truth? 2) If the answer to question one is yes, do I have to give up some of my own religious beliefs? and 3) What is the effect on my faith if I must abandon or modify my beliefs? This thesis will attempt to answer these questions, but in doing so, it will show that any answers must remain subjective and will vary according to the religious world view of the individual answering them. The reason for this is twofold: 1) each person, according to Hick, constructs her own religious beliefs according to her experience of the world and her religious cultural heritage, and 2) Hick is not concerned with knowing the truth of any particular religion, but in proposing that many religions contain some element of truth.

CHAPTER 1
Hick and the Pluralistic Hypothesis

John Hick's prolific and controversial works have earned him a prestigious seat at any table of discussion involving the philosophy of religion. He has, over the course of his academic career and his own personal spiritual journey, formulated, developed, and revised his groundbreaking thoughts on the epistemology of religion, especially in the area of religious pluralism and how thinking about core religious tenets and dogmas must be redone in order to become more inclusive, or all encompassing, of the greater world of religion that lies beyond one's normative and parochial religious experiences. He calls for a move beyond the restrictive aspects of one's social views of religion. He issues a challenge to abandon long held ideas of religious superiority and exclusive claims of truth for the sake of recognizing the truths of others' religions, truths which he believes are just as inspired and valuable as one's own.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce and examine what has become known as Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis. While Hick has continued to develop and revise his thoughts on this subject, his earliest works seem to contain the general thrust of his position, and this underlying theme of pluralism does not diminish in his later works.

This overview of the pluralistic hypothesis is taken from his *God and the Universe of Faiths*,[13] which dates back to 1973. Hick begins his hypothesis by acknowledging that there has historically been a fundamental relationship in the lives of many and varied cultures with some form or concept of an Ultimate Reality. Thus, *modern* religion stems from a revelation about the Ultimate Reality in the lives of the members of most societies. But if religion must also serve a purpose, according to Hick, it must provide "an understanding of the universe, together with an appropriate way of living within it, which involves reference beyond the natural world to God or gods or to the Absolute or to a transcendent order or process."[14] Therefore, religion, while addressing the metaphysical components of human thought, is also normative in that it must promote an ethical or moral atmosphere of harmony throughout human discourse. This definition is deliberately vague in order to include theistic, semi-theistic, and non-theistic faiths (e.g., Theravada Buddhism), but it excludes "purely naturalistic systems of belief, such as communism and humanism,[15] important

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[13] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1973), (hereafter cited as *Faiths*).

[14] Ibid., 133. There are problems here with Hick's definition of religion. While he attempts to be inclusive to the degree that non-theistic Eastern religions can be accepted within the pluralistic fold, his references to "God or gods . . . or to a transcendent order or process" will become problematic when he later attempts to synthesize theological concepts in order to demonstrate how his hypothesis can work in the everyday world of religious dialogue and interaction.

[15] These concepts will eventually be absorbed into Hick's ever expanding definition of religion in his later works as he adopts salvation/liberation talk. This even greater inclusivity is more fully developed in John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), (hereafter cited as *Interpretation*).

though these are today as alternatives to 'religious' life."[16] This statement of Hick's view of religion is fundamental to understanding where his hypothesis will lead because he has drawn in the supernatural in the form of "God or gods or . . . the Absolute or . . . a transcendent order or process." And these are certainly metaphysical concepts upon which the epistemology of religion has generated a great deal of rhetoric; proofs for the existence of God and the problem of evil are two of the front runners in this area.

Hick was also influenced by Wilfred Cantwell Smith's[17] "convincing critique of the concept of 'a religion' and of the notion of religions as contraposed sociotheological communities." This led Hick to posit that

> we ought instead to think of the religious life of mankind as a continuum within which the faith-life of individuals is conditioned by one or other of the different streams of cumulative tradition. From this point of view it is not appropriate to ask, Which is the true religion? For a true relationship to God may occur in the lives of people in each of the great religious traditions. With the problem in its older and insoluble form having thus been dismantled, it was possible to develop the idea of a "Copernican revolution" in our theology of religions, consisting in a paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered model to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths. One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.[18]

Note here the claim that in each religion there is some form of truth and that this perception counts as truth for those who experience it in their lives, which are acted out within a relationship to God as they understand it. This shift in Hick's religious thinking is fundamental to his pluralistic hypothesis. While he confirms the supernatural origins of religions, he also notes "the different streams of cumulative tradition" from which a plurality of religions has evolved. Nowhere has he posited independent sources of these "streams" or a multitude of Ultimate Realities. However, he does acknowledge the social nature of religions, the effect of culture on religions, and the continuity of religious development within a culture. What he is proposing is a letting go of the Christo-centric model of religion in favour of a Theistic-centric model that would lessen the influence of Christianity, especially in the West, on religious views and, what is more important, on religious truth claims. This is the beginning of what I refer to as the hard religious pluralist view of religious belief. For example, Hick's later shift in terminology to incorporate liberation into salvation talk necessitates an abandonment of creation doctrines so fundamental to western concepts of God and the replacement of Theistic-centric models with *Real*-centric concepts.

Before elaborating the concept of hard religious pluralism in Hick's thinking, it is necessary to look at his views on the effects of divine revelation and its origins. This is critical to the hard religious pluralist hypothesis since, in Hick's view, it explains the series of mutations that we find

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[16] Hick, *Faiths,* 133. Many will argue that baseball is a religion, meeting many standing definitions of religion. Émile Durkheim has excluded magic from religion on the basis that there is no "church of magic." Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 1912 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41-44.

[17] See W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962).

[18] Hick, *Names,* 18-19.

ourselves grappling with in today's religious world.

At the core of Hick's thesis is the need to come to terms with mutually exclusive truth claims that arise from a comparative study of religions. If religious observation were confined to the morality, ethics, or characters of individuals, and assuming these are assessed as being of a high quality and value, one would not necessarily need to delve deeper into the beliefs or activities of religious individuals; they exhibit laudable tendencies which their religions, perhaps intertwined with their cultures, have developed in them. Thus, a results-based schema of religious study works well with Hick's definition of religion in that many individuals have developed an "appropriate way of living within" the universe, and, presumably, this is a result of a "reference beyond the natural world to" a revelation from an Ultimate Reality. But further observations by Hick have complicated this otherwise harmonious view of religions' results. He notes that

> [w]hen you visit the various non-Christian places of worship in one of our big cities you discover—possibly with a shock of surprise—that phenomenologically (or in other words, to human observation) the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church. That is to say, human beings are coming together to open their minds to a higher reality, which is thought of as the personal creator and Lord of the universe, and as making vital demands upon the lives of men and women. Of course the trappings are very different—in a church men wear shoes and no hat; in mosque, gurdwara, and temple, a hat and no shoes; in a synagogue both. In some you sit on a pew, in others on the floor. In some there is singing, in others there is not. Different musical instruments or none are used. More important, the supreme being is referred to as God in a Christian church, as Adonai in a Jewish synagogue, as Allah in a Muslim mosque, as Ekoamkar in a Sikh gurdwara, as Rama or as Krishna in a Hindu temple. And yet there is an important sense in which what is being done in the several forms of worship is essentially the same.[19]

Thus, an examination of religious worship reveals different practices, postures, and apparel among practitioners on a sensory level, but, metaphysically speaking, there is the introduction of a variety of names for what may or may not, at this juncture, be the same object of religious devotion.[20]

At this point, Hick finds that there must be an overarching influence of a unitary revelation on the various forms of religion—on practices and beliefs at once different and seemingly exclusive, yet with similar underlying themes and tensions. To explain this divergence of views and religious development, Hick proposes the pluralistic hypothesis: the major world religions, while seemingly different and mutually exclusive, must have all originated from a unitary source of revelation from an Ultimate Reality given to some human settlements at roughly the same period in history, and today's differences can be discounted as merely the effects of history and culture on the original revelation.

The primary areas of this development are the "cradles of civilization"—Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley around 800 B.C.[21] According to the "axial age theory" of religious revelation,

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[19] Hick, *Names,* 62-63.

[20] Once again, while Hick notes the potential for similarities among religious practices, up to this point his observations have left out those religions which do not acknowledge a god or a creator.

[21] This theory, in Hick's version, neglects other areas of the world. One must wonder why the pluralistic theory neglects the balance of the world: Africa, the Americas, the far East, and the Pacific Ocean, especially

which is central to Hick's thesis, there was about a five hundred year period following this time when "a remarkable series of revelatory experiences [occurred] . . . in different parts of the world, experiences which deepened and purified men's conception of the ultimate, and which religious faith can only attribute to the pressure of the divine Spirit upon the human spirit."[22]

The axial age theory is the underlying premise in Hick's proposal of a common source of revelation from an Ultimate Reality. However, in his earliest writings on the subject there is no mention of Karl Jaspers' authoritative work, *The Origin and Goal of History*; Hick merely raises the coincidence of "what has been called the golden age of religious creativity" and suggests that what "we must consider is that these were all moments of divine revelation."[23] But in *Interpretation* Hick acknowledges Jaspers' contributions when he describes a change in human existence which saw

> the conditions gradually formed for the emergence of individuality. What these conditions were and how they developed are still, in detail, *largely matters of speculation* [emphasis added]. But in what Karl Jaspers has identified as the *Achsenzeit,* from very approximately 800 to very approximately 200 BCE, *significant human individuals appeared through whose insights—though always within the existing setting of their own culture—human awareness was immensely enlarged and developed, and a movement began from archaic religion to the religions of salvation or liberation* [emphasis added].[24]

What Jaspers has to say on the subject of the axial age comes very early in his own work. He is concerned there to debunk the Western notion that "the philosophy of history was founded in the Christian faith."[25] He writes that

> [a]n axis of world history, if such a thing exists, would have to be discovered *empirically*, as a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men, Christians, included. This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity; its character would have to be, if not empirically cogent and evident, yet so convincing to empirical insight as to give rise to a common frame of historical self-comprehension for all peoples—for the West, for Asia, and for all men on earth, without regard to particular articles of faith. It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the 'Axial Period'.[26]

Australia.

[22] John Hick, "The New Map of the Universe of Faiths," in Hick, *Faiths,* 135. This theory is, of course, not original to Hick. While it has been ascribed to Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), many others have also adapted it to their work. Cf. Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007).

[23] Ibid*.,* 135-6.

[24] Hick, *Interpretation*, 29.

[25] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953), 1.

[26] Ibid. Note the tone here. Although Jaspers is credited with promoting the axial age theory, he does not seem strongly attached to its veracity, whereas Hick depends heavily upon it. Additionally, we can see here that

Jaspers here alludes to some changes in "spiritual process" which he further elaborates by detailing the great historical figures of religion and philosophy that arose in this period: "man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. . . . He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence."[27] This, then, appears to be the starting point of Hick's thesis.

In attempting to reach an understanding of Hick's thesis, we must accept the theory that the Ultimate Reality finally made itself known as a personal being to humankind. It was no longer located behind the scenes but moved onto the centre stage of human existence—naturalism and animism's shadowy figures gave way to the Ultimate Reality on the plane of everyday human life.[28] In effect, the creativity previously shown in human relations with the world through countless impersonal spirits and deities now suddenly became dependent upon a greater force in the universe. Thus, for humanity, the concept of the Ultimate Reality can be dated from a period less than three thousand years ago, according to Hick and others who hold to this theory. That being the case, if there were such a thing as an Ultimate Reality operating in the universe prior to this series of events, it did so well in the background of human consciousness or awareness.

Hick lists as proof of this seminal period of the Ultimate Reality's self-revelation the following: the early Jewish prophets who spoke on behalf of the Lord, claiming that obedience, righteousness, and justice must become evident in the lives of their people; Persia produced the prophet Zoroaster and his dualistic concept of good and evil; in China there appeared Lao-Tzu and Confucius; India developed the Upanishads, also giving rise to the Buddha and Mahavira, followed by the important work of the Bhagavad Gītā; the Greeks produced Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato; later Jesus of Nazareth came from the Jewish nation; and, finally, the prophet Mohammed arose giving rise to Islam.[29] Accordingly Hick infers that "we must consider . . . that these were all moments of divine revelation."[30]

While the foregoing are historically founded observations of the rough time period Hick is

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Jaspers would extend such a concept of rethinking human references to history to the entire globe and not merely restrict it to certain concepts of religious thought as Hick does, a point I noted earlier in footnote 21.

[27] Ibid., 2.

[28] However, we must not fail to take notice that there are, in fact, four main world views of religion that dominate thinking to this day: theistic religion (with Christianity being an example of theistic and Hinduism an example of a polytheistic and pantheistic religion), which postulates the divine as a real force in the universe; the non-theistic religions (with Marxism/Leninism and Theravada Buddhism as examples) which deny the possibility of the existence of God or gods; Secular Humanism which is also atheistic; and Cosmic Humanism, or New Age, which is a return to pantheism and the rejection of anything divine outside of the individual.

[29] Hick, *Faiths,* 135-136.

[30] Ibid.

examining,[31] he also notes the fragmentary revelation of the Ultimate Reality and the scattered crumbs of divine knowledge thus imparted. While Hick theorizes this to be the crucial underpinning for his concept of hard religious pluralism, he explains the paucity of knowledge revealed, and the "therefore presumably partial" disparity in its dissemination, in the following:

> But let us ask, in order to test this thought, whether we should not expect God to make his revelation in a single mighty act, rather than to produce a number of different, and therefore presumably partial, revelations at different times and places? I think that in seeing the answer to this question we receive an important clue to the place of the religions of the world in the divine purpose. For when we remember the facts of history and geography we realize that in the period we are speaking of, between two and three thousand years ago, it was not possible for God to reveal himself through any human mediation to all mankind. A world-wide revelation might be possible today, thanks to the inventions of printing, and even more of radio, TV and communication satellites. But in the technology of the ancient world this was not possible. . . . Communications between the different groups of humanity was then so limited and slow that for all practical purposes men inhabited different worlds. . . . and as the world was so fragmented, so was religious life. If there was to be a revelation of the divine reality to mankind it had to be a pluriform revelation, a series of revealing experiences occurring independently within the different streams of human history. And since religion and culture were one, the great creative moments of revelation and illumination have influenced the development of the various cultures, giving them the coherence and impetus to expand into larger units, thus creating the vast, many-sided historical entities which we call the world religions.[32]

Taken at face value, the foregoing leaves us with a fragmented overview of the world religions in which divine revelation, or knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, was imparted sporadically and in varied forms as to content and truth over a specifically limited period of human history. Thus, before this period, religion was practiced without revelation and afterwards it developed because of revelation, but revelation was limited to human understanding within a cultural context, and its evolution over time was directly related to change in the receiving culture. What is of crucial importance to Hick's thesis is that the content of the Ultimate Reality's revelation cannot necessarily be elucidated (presumably the mists of time have shrouded what exactly it was), but it can be accepted as a fact of history simply because of the rise of the aforementioned individuals and philosophical systems in this period. Once one accepts these historic moments as *Ultimate Reality originated* or *revealed* and, of course, uniform in the underlying message given (but "pluriform in its dissemination) one can attempt to show how they diverged historically and culturally.

Part of the cultural divergence of the original revelation can be explained by a closer examination of how susceptible humanity was to receive it:

> Let us then think of the Eternal One as pressing in upon the human spirit, seeking to be known and responded to by man, and seeking through man's free responses to create the human animal into (in our Judeo-Christian language) a child of God, or toward a perfected humanity. And let us suppose that in that first millennium B.C. human life had developed to the point at which man was able to receive and respond to a new and much fuller vision of the divine reality and of the claim of that reality upon his life. Such a break through

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[31] Arguably this time line is too restrictive in that the earliest elements of Judaism and Hinduism can be located 1200 years earlier and Mohammed's dates are 800 years past it. But the point is made that many individuals claiming direct knowledge of something beyond the phenomenal world arose in this era.

[32] Hick, *Faiths,* 136-137.

is traditionally called revelation, and the revelation was, as I have pointed out, already plural. But should we not expect there to have been *one* single revelation for all mankind, rather than several different revelations? The answer, I suggest, is no—not if we take seriously into account the actual facts of human life in history. For in that distant period, some two and a half thousand years ago, the civilizations of China, of India, and of the Near East could almost have been located on different planets, so tenuous and slow were the lines of communication between them. A divine revelation intended for all mankind but occurring in China, or in India, or in Israel would have taken many centuries to spread to the other countries. But we are supposing that the source of revelation was always seeking to communicate to mankind, and in new ways to as much of mankind as was living within the higher civilizations that had then developed. From this point of view it seems natural that the revelation should have been plural, occurring separately in the different centers of human culture.[33]

Here we can see the impetus for divergence from the original source of revelation. If it could change or develop within a receiving culture over several centuries, it is not surprising that, being passed through one culture before being transmitted to another culture, it would possibly start out somewhat differently from the first reception before undergoing a new series of culturally influenced iterations.

There is another aspect of the receptivity of humans to revelations from the Ultimate Reality which Hick notes and which will become crucial to the further development of his thinking concerning religious divergence. He refers to this as the "epistemology of revelation":

> Thomas Aquinas stated a profound epistemological truth, which has an even wider application than he realized, when he said that "The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower" (*Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q.1, art. 2). In other words, our awareness of something is the awareness that we are able to have, given our own particular nature and the particular character of our cognitive machinery.[34]

This hypothesis of cognitive *limitation*, which is at the receiving end of the Ultimate Reality's direction of itself towards humanity, may well explain the further development of awareness of the divine or supernatural concepts originally imparted to our ancestors. They first attempted to make sense of them within the confines of their comparatively primitive existences and developed them further as an increased awareness of the complexity of the universe unfolded to humanity down through successive ages of investigation and observance. However, the primary importance of this observation pertains to Hick's later development of truth in religion stemming from a cognitive *choice* by the individual who may come to see the world through religious eyes rather than natural ones. This person will develop her religious beliefs from her experiences of the world, and they will, of course, be culturally influenced and shaped.

While this process or development of religious awareness may seem somewhat haphazard, Hick does believe he can explain how different and seemingly exclusive truth claims are simply cultural interpretations of one and the same thing:

> from the standpoint of religious faith the only reasonable hypothesis is that this historical picture represents a movement of divine self-revelation to mankind. This hypothesis offers a general answer to the question of the relation between the different world religions and of the truths which they embody. It suggests to us that the same divine reality has always been self-revealingly active towards mankind, and that the differences of human

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[33] Hick, *Names,* 48.

[34] Ibid*.,* 48-49.

responses are related to different human circumstances.[35]

To bolster the hypothesis, Hick uses the oft quoted analogy from Jaina philosophy which tells of several blind men being asked by their king to examine the various parts of an elephant. The elephant is real, but they each grasp a part (leg, trunk, tusk), and each, with limited cognition due to his particular sensory loss, offers a defective explanation of an elephant as something based entirely on a mistaken view of a single part (a living pillar, a great snake, a sharp ploughshare). While each one insisted that only his view was the correct one and that the others' views were false, Hick notes that "in fact of course they were all true, but each referring only to one aspect of the total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies."[36] And from this realization "it follows that the different encounters with the transcendent within the different religious traditions may all be encounters with the one infinite reality."[37] He further says, "the probability that we have seriously to consider is that many different accounts of the divine reality may be true, though all expressed in imperfect human analogies, but that none is 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' "[38]

The pluralistic hypothesis, then, is an explanation of how we can get past what seem to be radically different and even mutually exclusive beliefs made by religious adepts, when they hold their own systems to be the culminations of truth on the subject and thus superior. By positing a single originating source of religious truth, Hick postulates that they are saying pretty much the same things but expressing themselves in culturally different ways. That being the case, a soft religious pluralism might be expected to see greater fruition in religious thinking. One can hold to her own religious views without denying others the same privilege if she comes to understand that each system is merely using different ways to express the same truth of religious belief. And this realization will attain once she admits the possibility that "the same divine reality has always been self-revealingly active towards mankind, and that the differences of human responses are related to different human circumstances."[39]

But one might well at this stage ask: "How can something like creation be addressed when some affirm the world was created and others insist it always existed?" Are these not mutually exclusive positions which seem irreconcilable? They seem to represent the tension between the theistic and non-theistic world religions. These and many other questions arise in interreligious dialogue and they need to be explained. While a later chapter will take a closer look at such questions, Hick does have a response. For example, in the case of the foregoing question, the focal point of creation is deflected by framing the discussion within its own context and avoiding the larger issue. That is to say, the important or weighty matters of religion do not rest on such questions as the origin of the universe for

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[35] Hick, *Faiths,* 138.

[36] Ibid., 140.

[37] Ibid., 139.

[38] Ibid., 140.

[39] Ibid., 138.

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 that the universe is or is not eternal cannot significantly help or hinder the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. If it should one day become clear to all that either the traditional Indian or the traditional Semitic view on this question is mistaken, the discovery would not in any degree invalidate that family of religious traditions as contexts of salvation/liberation. Thus not only do we not know whether the universe is eternal, but this ignorance does not constitute a bar to the attainment of liberation; and further, to treat it as though it were soteriologically essential would only be likely to hinder the salvific process.

       The question, then, whether the universe does or does not have a temporal beginning, and likewise whether it is created *ex nihilo*, or is a divine emanation, or a manifestation of the Real, or a product of our blindness to the Real, is not soteriologically vital. Whilst holding any or none of these theories we may still participate in the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.[40]

Here we should notice the shift in Hick's later language from salvation orientation to salvation/liberation language. Overcoming the historic distinction between salvation or liberation as the ultimate end of physical life is but one example of how Hick believes pluralism has great value. We can concentrate primarily on the function of religion itself (i.e., salvation/liberation) if we quit fussing over the intricacies of metaphysical concepts (concepts which may have been initially misunderstood) which we cannot definitively prove, and we will have much less to differ over and less division or feelings of superiority among religious practitioners. In other words, since we cannot prove the veracity of our own positions on a particular religious subject (that which is believed to be divinely given or commanded) neither can others who hold opposing beliefs; we would do well to concentrate our efforts on a more neutral plane and discuss the creation of our beliefs rather than our beliefs in creation itself.

While such a reductionist position might be tenable for some purposes, a closer look at how religions have diverged over history, from their supposed unitary point of origin, raises a serious concern. At the heart of this concern is the ability of humans to conceptualize the Ultimate Reality in the first place. Hick says that

       [t]o develop this hypothesis, we must, I think, distinguish between the Eternal One in itself [a transcendent Ultimate Reality], in its eternal self-existent being, beyond relationship to a creation, and the Eternal One in relation to mankind and as perceived from within our different human cultural situations [a knowable Ultimate Reality]. Man's awareness of the Eternal One—like all our awareness of reality—is focused by concepts. There are in fact two different basic concepts involved in the religious life of mankind. One is the concept of deity, or of the Eternal One as personal, which presides over the theistic modes of religion; and the other is the concept of the Absolute, or the Eternal One as nonpersonal, which presides over the nontheistic or transtheistic modes of religion. . . . The concept of deity [in theistic religion], or of God, takes concrete form, and a "local habitation and a name," in the life of a particular human community and culture as a specific divine *persona* or face or image or icon of the Eternal One. Yahweh of Israel is one such divine *persona*. . . . You cannot abstract Yahweh from his historical relationship with this particular people. . . . he represents a genuine, authentic, valid human perception of the Eternal One from within a particular human culture and strand of history. But he is a different divine *persona* from, say Shiva or from Krishna . . . Thus the many gods are not separate and distinct divine beings, but rather different *personae* formed in the interaction of divine presence and human projection. The divine presence is the presence of the Eternal One to our finite human consciousness, and the human projections are the culturally conditioned images and symbols in terms of which

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[40] Hick, *Interpretation,* 367.

we concretize the basic concept of deity.[41]

Thus it would seem that Hick is here recognizing that anything we can say about the Ultimate Reality, right from the beginning, is determined by our ability to conceptualize what the revelation was. But, in doing so, our attempts are limited, and one of the limiting factors is how our culture comes to terms with the idea of a deity. However, Hick has also introduced a double Ultimate Reality—one which transcends our ability to even contemplate its attributes and another which is known through our limited human responses to it.[42] As early as 1964 Hick acknowledged human limitations in experiencing God. He observed that

> [s]everal writers have pointed out the logical difficulty involved in any claim to have encountered God. How could one know that it was *God* whom one had encountered? God is described in Christian theology in terms of various absolute qualities, such as omnipotence, omnipresence, perfect goodness, infinite love, etc., which cannot as such be observed by us, as can their finite analogues, limited power, local presence, finite goodness, and human love. One can recognize that a being whom one "encounters" has a given finite degree of power, but how does one observe that an encountered being is *omnipresent*? How does one perceive that his goodness and love, which one can perhaps see to exceed any human goodness and love, are actually infinite? Such qualities cannot be given in human experience. One might claim, then, to have encountered a Being whom one presumes, or trusts, or hopes to be God; but one cannot claim to have encountered a Being whom one recognized to be the infinite, almighty, eternal Creator.[43]

Once we accept human limitations in experiencing and expressing this *Transcendent Ultimate Reality's*[44] revelation of itself to humanity, we can readily come to agree with Hick that the development of such a revelation is subject to many influences and possible distortions throughout the passage of time. Therefore, humans are severely limited in their ability to relate to any concept of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality that transcends what their minds are wired to make sense of.[45] While we might acknowledge certain *a priori* concepts of God, we are limited by experience in what we can say or claim about the nature of God. We can certainly deduce one concept from something previously taken to be true, but in doing so we must work within verification principles that make

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[41] Hick, *Names,* 52-53.

[42] The question of a personal vs. an absolute or transcendent God has long played a part in the divergence between Eastern and Western religious thought and interpretation. However, even the concept of a personal God, one known through human experience, is fraught with difficulties because, by the very nature of godness, we would expect it to transcend whatever attributes we could hope to give it. Thus, it becomes a paradox of the knowable against the unknowable. The same holds for a transcendent deity in which, while holding to the ineffableness of a cosmic force, one hopes to unite with or come to some point of contact with it.

[43] John Hick, "Religious Statements as Factually Significant," in *The Existence of God: A reader edited and with an introduction by John Hick,* ed. John Hick (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1964), 270-271 (hereafter cited as *Existence*).

[44] I shall now use this term to emphasize Hick's ongoing shift in terminology as he develops his thesis to incorporate ever increasing aspects of the non-theistic religions.

[45] I shall touch upon mysticism and esoteric knowledge of the transcendent below and in the next chapter.

sense of what we believe we know about the divine.[46]

Hick turns to Kant's theories at this stage when he says,

> [a]t this point we have to take note of the problem posed by the plurality of religious traditions. Having argued for the rationality of religious belief and practice on the basis of the acceptance of religious experience as genuine contact with transcendent reality, we are faced with the very diverse, and apparently conflicting, beliefs and practices of the various traditions. The basic hypothesis which suggests itself is that the different streams of religious experience represent diverse awarenesses of the same transcendent reality which is perceived in characteristically different ways by different human mentalities, formed by and forming different cultural histories.
>
> Proceeding inductively from the plurality of forms of religious experience, accepted as variously cognitive (and miscognitive) of transcendent reality, we have to distinguish between that transcendent reality *an sich* and as it is experienced by human beings. Let us call the former the Eternal One—a term which draws ambivalently upon two different sets of associations: on the one hand the mystical One of Plotinus and the One without a second of the Upanishads, and on the other hand the One who is the divine Thou of the biblical narratives. For the Eternal One, as the transcendent reality, both lies beyond human experience and conceptuality and, at the same time, is the ground of all dependent being, including personal beings. The Eternal One is thus the divine noumenon which is experienced and thought within the different religious traditions as the range of divine phenomena witnessed to by the religious history of mankind.
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> The philosophical framework here is Kantian, but with the proviso that the phenomenal world *is* the noumenal world as humanly experienced. The result is the distinctly non-Kantian thesis that the divine is experienced (rather than postulated, as Kant believed), but is experienced within the limitations of our human cognitive apparatus in ways analogous to that in which he argued that we experience our physical environment.[47]

Hick, at this point, appears to suggest that the arguments arising from a plurality of religions and their related experiences can be reduced to concepts that we have the ability to make, which stem from human cognitive abilities, but such differences may be made to wither under the glare of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality that we cannot hope to experience through human limitations. That is to say, the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, or Kant's "radical transcendence," is beyond our knowing or comprehension, and our differing perceptions of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality are based on a severe limitation incorporated within a limited human capability to experience the genuine source of revelation. Hick believes that the Transcendent Ultimate Reality has two levels to its existence for us. The familiar god of each religion is described in terms that are limited both

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[46] Hick, at this stage of his reasoning, is very concerned to diffuse any positivist objections about religious language not having any real meaning. As a proclaimed theist, Hick believes in the existence of God, and thus language describing him/her has meaning, and he takes great pains to ensure that whatever is claimed is verifiable. The ultimate proof of his belief in a theistic god can be found in his eschatological verification hypothesis that upon death the truth claims of salvation will be verified by the believer's transportation into the presence of God, or not, as the case may be. However, in his later thinking, this claim will also include attainment of final liberation. This theory will undergo some fine tuning, and he postulates that the end of life is but the beginning of a series of existences in which the individual will become more and more perfected. This thinking underscores his deep commitment to the character-building aspect of religious belief which has soteriological implications. See John Hick, "Faith and Verification," in *Faith and Knowledge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), (hereafter cited as *Faith*); and John Hick, "Eschatological Verification Reconsidered," *Religious Studies* 13 (1977): 189-202.

[47] Hick, *Names,* 82-83.

by human awareness and human ability to describe it. But the actual reality of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is so far beyond what we can comprehend that any attempts are almost meaningless. What we describe when we attempt to describe God is the being that is associated with a particular religious culture. Thus it is possible to have very different descriptions of God because he/she is viewed so differently by many cultures. What we can attempt to grasp, for Hick, is the idea of a *moderate* transcendence (our finite attempts at defining the infinite)*,* which, although limited, can give us a workable glimpse into the concept of an actual Transcendent Ultimate Reality.

Hick further explains, when commenting on Ludwig Feuerbach's exposition "on the distinction between 'God as he is in himself and God as he is for me' as a skeptical distinction," that

> it is true that, on this view, we have to accept that the infinite divine reality is only knowable by man insofar as it impinges upon finite human consciousnesses, with their variously limited and conditioned capacities for awareness and response. But once we accept this, then the very plurality and variety of the human experiences of God provide a wider basis for theology than can the experience of any one religious tradition taken by itself.[48]

Therefore, our ancestors had to await whatever revelation (or partial series of revelations) the Transcendent Ultimate Reality chose to make of itself to them, and they were restricted by their cognitive abilities when they attempted to make sense of them. The interesting thing for Hick's pluralistic outlook is that the various cultural lenses (coupled with our limited human minds) through which revelations are directed are a positive thing in that they serve to create a mosaic of aspects of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality which might otherwise be lost or overlooked by viewers restricted to a single world view.

One might well argue that certain religious mystics have indeed been able to move beyond experiences of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality that are themselves limited by the scope of everyday human experiences; they may in fact experience a radical transcendence. Indeed many religions have mystical traditions that perhaps offer insight into a Transcendent Ultimate Reality. Hick does acknowledge the importance of mystical revelations to a religious tradition. However, he is skeptical that direct awareness of the radical transcendence is truly achievable by the human consciousness as is shown in the following quotation:

> There are indeed certain features of visionary experiences that occur cross-culturally: the direct awareness of light and the relational awareness of height, depth and magnitude. These seem to have universal symbolic significance. However even the experience, for example of seeing a bright light can take on a tradition-specific character. Thus in many of the reports of persons resuscitated after having almost died the 'being of light' is experienced by Christians, but not by people of other traditions, as the dazzling presence of Christ. This suggests that the same experience is being differently interpreted and described. But this only applies to these rather few common features. Much the greater part of the phenomenology of visions and auditions comes unmistakably from the experiencer's own scriptures and traditions. The different persons encountered, symbols deployed, words heard, are clearly related to characteristic features of the tradition within which the mystic functions. As has often been pointed out, it is invariably a Catholic Christian who sees a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a Vaishnavite Hindu who sees a vision of Krishna, but not *vice versa*. This fact strongly suggests that the distinctive ideas and images, the historical and mythological themes, and the range of expectation made available by the mystic's tradition have provided the material out of which the experience

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[48] Ibid.*,* 110.

is constructed.[49]

The mystical experience, then, may well be conditioned by confessional and religious traditions. Under these limiting factors, the any apprehension of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality might well lie within the realm of mythology itself.

At this juncture one must conclude that the situation seems highly improbable for the promotion of religious pluralism beyond the framework of soft pluralism in which we become more aware, tolerant, and accepting of the beliefs of those we formerly distrusted or even disparaged. But Hick has set the stage for his promotion of hard religious pluralism by addressing the very concept of mythology in which concepts of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality may have formerly arisen.[50]

Hick, taking Christianity as but one example of how a mythological viewpoint might be developed into a venue for hard religious pluralism, argues that Christians can simply reinterpret their long held dogmas about who or what Jesus Christ is. Having done so, they might step back from positions of religious exclusivism and accept their proper position as but one of many ways of expressing the revelations of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality. Christianity's idea that Christ is the only way to salvation, assuming indeed that salvation is what the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is all about, is too restrictive a concept for hard religious pluralism and is detrimental to moving forward with other faith systems. Hick proposes that if his form of religious pluralism is to be adopted we must

> ask the question that is so important to us as Christians, namely, what does all this imply concerning the person of our Lord? What about the uniqueness of Christ, the belief that Jesus was God incarnate, the second Person of the holy Trinity become man, the eternal Logos made flesh? Did he not say, "I and the Father are one," and "No one comes to the Father, but by me"? Here, unfortunately, we have to enter the realm of New Testament criticism and I say "unfortunately" because of the notorious uncertainties of this realm. There are powerful schools of thought, following fashions which tend to change from generation to generation, but no consensus

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[49] Hick, *Interpretation,* 166.

[50] Hick intends that the advancement of hard religious pluralism requires a reinterpretation of how we view anything to do with the historical claims that religions make for their links to the Transcendent Ultimate Reality. He has a system of language use that will smoothe over the exclusive truth claims wherein he mixes the terms *myth* and *metaphor* and uses them interchangeably. According to Christopher Sinkinson:

> In *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* the atonement is also subjected to this treatment and understood to be a pictorial use of language. Hick rejects the doctrine of original sin, for which atonement is required, as a literal truth and interprets it as a "mythological way of referring to the fact of universal imperfection." He also rejects belief in a historic fall of humankind as totally unbelievable in light of modern geology and anthropology. To retain the language of the fall is to use mythological language: "we can say that the earliest humans were, metaphorically speaking, already 'fallen' in the sense of being morally and spiritually imperfect." The metaphysical reality of atonement is also abandoned by Hick in favour of a mythological interpretation of this doctrine. Hick portrays much of church history as having been a struggle to get away from a literal view of the atonement, and in *The Rainbow of Faiths* suggests that a gathering consensus now interprets the doctrine as pictorial language.

Christopher Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths: A critical study of John Hick's religious pluralism* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), 96-97 (hereafter cited as *Critical Study*).

either across the years or across the schools.[51] But this at least can be said: that whereas until some three or four generations ago it was generally accepted among biblical scholars that Jesus claimed to be God the Son, with a unique consciousness of divinity, so that the doctrine of the incarnation was believed to be firmly based on the consciousness and teaching of Jesus himself, today this is no longer generally held and is indeed very widely thought not to be the case. . . . [Pannenberg] "Today it must be taken as all but certain that the pre-Easter Jesus neither designated himself as Messiah (or the Son of God) nor accepted such a confession to him from others" (p. 237).[52] Not all New Testament scholars would endorse Pannenberg's words. But certainly one can no longer regard it as a fact proved out of the New Testament that Jesus thought of himself as God incarnate. On the contrary, this now seems to be very unlikely. And certainly we cannot rest anything on the assumption that the great Christological sayings of the Fourth Gospel (such as "I and my Father are one") were ever spoken, in historical fact, by the Jesus who walked the hills and villages of Galilee. It seems altogether more probable that they reflect the developing theology of the church toward the end of the first century.[53]

Therefore, Hick asks, in the name of hard religious pluralism, that Christians, in this case, adopt some of the postulations of modern biblical criticism, and consider deconstructing their long held traditional beliefs based on the integral role of the Scriptures which are the core of the Christian faith—at least those which allude to the divinity of Christ, the founding principle of this religion. New insights into the history of the Christian church, obtained through scholarly research, while seemingly damaging to long held doctrinal beliefs, should tend to support Hick's preference for the use of metaphorical language and a mythological underpinning of the faith. Hick does offer a possibility that Christians might hold to a less rigid aspect of the divinity of Christ by viewing such scriptural claims as simply the particular use of language—*Jesus talk*, so to speak, *à la* Wittgenstein. He says that

> it seems more profitable to accept that the Son-of-God and God-incarnate language has become deeply entrenched in the discourse of Christian thought and piety, and to ask what *kind* of language it is. Is the statement that Jesus was God incarnate, or the Son of God, or God the Son, a statement of literal fact; and if so, what precisely is the fact? Or is it a poetic, or symbolic, or mythological statement? It can, I think only be the latter. It can hardly be a literal, factual statement, since after nearly two thousand years of Christian reflection no factual content has been discerned in it—unless, that is we give factual content in terms of the idea of Jesus' virgin birth. We could then say that his being the Son of God means that the Holy Spirit fulfilled the role of male parent in his conception. But he would then be a divine-human figure such as is familiar from Greek mythology; . . . For the reason why it has never been possible to state a literal meaning for the idea of incarnation is simply that it has no literal meaning. It is a mythological idea, a figure of speech, a piece of poetic imagery. It is a way of saying that Jesus is our living contact with the transcendent God. In his presence we find that we are brought into the presence of God. We believe that he is so truly God's servant that in living as his disciples we are living according to the divine purpose. And as our sufficient and saving point of contact with God there is for us something absolute about him which justifies the absolute language which Christianity has developed. Thus reality is being expressed mythologically when we say that Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, the Logos made flesh.

[51] Let us be mindful here that the same situation prevails in all of the other great world religions. Many schools of thought have sprung up from the original founding school in each of them, and they also undergo textual criticism of their own canons of sacred scripture.

[52] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1968).

[53] Hick, *Names,* 72-73.

. . . , we no longer have to draw the negative conclusion that he is man's one and only effective point of contact with God. We can revere Christ as the one through whom we have found salvation, without having to deny other points of reported saving contact between God and man. We can commend the way of Christian faith without having to discommend other ways of faith.[54]

Thus, we can reduce many of Christianity's core concepts to mythological expressions of a human touch point within a divine/human relationship instituted by God for humanity; God uses Christ to get to us without actually having Christ become God in the process! For Hick, the idea that Christ is God is a historical development with a myth as its basis.[55]

While Hick has devoted many more pages and volumes to his hard pluralistic epistemology of religion, this last quotation effectively sums up his position on the matter: religious co-operation can only proceed if adherents of particular faiths are prepared to, on the one hand, admit that they do not have an exclusivity attached to the truth of their faiths, and, on the other hand, that they are prepared to acknowledge the presence of some degree of truth about the Ultimate Reality in all the other religions, at least in all the other great world religions. To enable them to do so, Hick builds on the thesis of the great axial age in which the major world religions arose, thus attempting to give a common starting point or origin for those faiths that stem from divine revelation. Once believers come to accept this thesis, they can begin to dismantle mutually exclusive truth claims that are barriers to understanding the Transcendent Ultimate Reality (these can be written off as simply mythological concepts created to allow their less sophisticated ancestors to make sense of their received revelations), and, in doing so, they will abandon all claims of the superiority of their own religion over the religions of others. Such dismantling must be done, even at the cost of dramatically altering the very essence of a particular religion, in order to achieve this goal. In the end I would characterize his position as reductionist and revisionist: hard religious pluralism can be attained by 1) reducing all of the great world religions to a single origin, and 2) by stripping them of their uniqueness in order to do away with mutually exclusive claims to the truth and to claims of superiority.

In the following chapter, I propose to examine Hick's thesis critically and to dispute its validity. I argue that it is in some ways defective, fraught with contradictions, and philosophically unsound.

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[54] Ibid., 73-75.

[55] His two works devoted to this hypothesis are: John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977); and John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), (hereafter cited as *Metaphor*).

CHAPTER TWO
Contra Hick

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze critically the development of John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis and to determine its viability as a cogent argument to support hard religious pluralism. I will begin with an argument in defense of religious exclusivism, and will show that in a *soft* version it can be an alternative to religious pluralism, especially hard religious pluralism. Then I will examine and reject the concept of transcendence as a supporting element in Hick's thesis. Following this, I will raise both the question of circularity in his thesis and the noticeable absence of miracles, which support the truth claims of many religions. Next I will delineate the actual development of three of the great world religions in order to show their common origins: the charismatic religious innovator—a historical development that tends to refute Hick's axial age hypothesis. From these charismatic origins it will become apparent that Hick, although correctly noting religious divergences in the present age, is wrong in assuming those religions started out closer in agreement: they were vastly divergent at their origins as well. The next objection to Hick's postulation of the unity behind a revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality is that the embryonic religion, following the death of its charismatic founder, must fight through radically different claims about his/her teachings to establish its basic form—it could have developed along very different lines from its origins to its earliest recognizable shape. Finally, I will conclude that Hick's thesis is reductionist, revisionist, and generally unsupportable in its current expression because it discounts what value religions hold for their believers.

The classic argument against hard religious pluralism has been mounted by Alvin Plantinga in his essay "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism."[56] Plantinga is well aware of the diversity of truth claims that arise whenever and wherever individuals ask questions concerning truth, especially religious truth. Just imagine any gathering of philosophers; they all come at the truth from within their own particular schools of thought and are well aware of how someone from another philosophical school would answer a particular question which might be posed. This situation is fine within the confines of academia, but it is certainly disheartening for an outsider who is in search of a definitive answer. And Plantinga acknowledges that the same circumstances arise when one looks to religion and notes the many different schools of thought and their varied and often conflicting claims to religious truth.

This disparity in the quest for definitive truth will be especially noticeable when questions turn to religious truths. This is because those who hold religious beliefs have a vested interest in their own religious truth claims. Any examination of religious pluralism must take serious note of its counter part, religious exclusivism. In Plantinga's words, "Of course, there is a great deal more to any religion or religious practice than just belief. . . . But belief is a crucially important part of most religions; it is a crucially important part of *my* religion; and the question I mean to ask here is, What does the awareness of religious diversity mean . . . for my religious beliefs?"[57] Here, Plantinga has

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[56] Alvin Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in Louis Pojman, ed. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology.* 4th ed. (Toronto: Nelson Thomson Learning, 2003), reprinted from its original version in an earlier edition (hereafter cited as Exclusivism).

[57] Ibid., 508.

isolated the essence of the problem espoused by religious pluralism in general and hard religious pluralism in particular: we all have vested interests in supporting our own claims to religious truth. Therefore, we cannot have a meaningful discussion about this subject unless we are prepared to "bracket"[58] our own points of view and exclude them from the discussion of religious truth claims (this does not, of course, require us to abandon our beliefs but to simply set them aside momentarily to allow us to dialogue with those holding disparate views). However, the contemplation of the possibility of viable truth claims in others' religions raises another problem: Why should I choose to forego my own beliefs about the truths of my religious system even if I am convinced other religions contain some truth? While this question will be more closely examined later in this thesis, Hick seems to think that it must be possible to bracket our own beliefs while speculating about questions of religious truth and their mutually exclusive claims. But in the final analysis, as Hick acknowledges, religion does something (for Hick it somehow relates us to the transcendent). The concept of religious pluralism must always be framed within that context, for if, in the pursuit of a definitive answer to the question of religious truth, we ultimately destroy the ability of religion to function meaningfully in the lives of religious adherents, the subject of examination will indeed itself die on the examining table.

However, the door has now been forced open to the possibility of religious pluralism and cannot be shut, but the very existence of religious pluralism will affect individuals in a number of ways—some not necessarily as positive as Hick might hope. It is certainly a fact that virtually all religious societies were aware of different religions outside of their own, and, in a time when other religions were the stuff of travel stories and exotic tales of foreign places, one could certainly have continued to hold an exclusivist position without any reproach, for his or her own religion and its associated beliefs were all that he or she could have been expected to know and experience about such subjects. But the opening up of the world in the past few centuries, the rise of immigration, and the burgeoning study of comparative religion have certainly brought home the possibility that we might investigate further the truth claims made by what was once so foreign to our immediate cultures and world views. In addition, the rise of evolutionary theories concerning the origins of life itself has had some impact on many who may well pause to reflect on the truth claims of their own religious beliefs regarding the creation of life and its causes, or even whether there was an external cause of life at all. Thus, there is now very fertile ground to sow the seeds of inquiry into religions in this current period of history. The question remains though of how we are to handle such inquiries. Missionary activity notwithstanding, a religion's practitioners can no longer expect the rest of the world to come to the conclusion that their particular system is the sole source of religious truth, which is available to

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[58] This use of the term is often associated with to Joachim Wach (1897-1955). It refers to the suspension of judgement in which both the particular phenomena of study and the researcher's own personal biases are bracketed and just the facts as they present themselves are considered. According to Theodore Ludwig, "Wach repeatedly takes up the question of the "objectivity" of the interpreter, whether one who is not a committed believer can understand a religion, whether historical distance helps or hinders understanding, and the like. His position is argued at length: the scholar can by "bracketing" his or her own views enter into understanding of another religion, sometimes presenting it even more completely and accurately than believers can. But there must be, Wach argues, an empathy or sensitivity for religion on the part of the scholar, otherwise there can be no understanding." Theodore Ludwig, "Review: Joachim Wach's Voice Speaks Again" in *History of Religions,* Vol. 29, No. 3 (February 1990): 291.

anyone wishing to convert to their religion's point of view. And this new state of religious knowledge and increasing exposure to many other religious views and practices might well be expected to arouse both interest in and empathy for the religious diversity which we are now facing.

At this point we must distinguish between (a) a voluntary acceptance of religious diversity and (b) the restrictions on, or changes to, a believer's firmly held religious beliefs which Hick's brand of pluralism asks her to accept. In extreme cases, the latter may give rise to cognitive dissonance which can lead towards religious violence when religious adepts feel threatened. Cognitive dissonance, as elucidated by psychologist David G. Myers, occurs

> [w]hen aware that our attitudes and actions don't coincide, we experience tension called *cognitive dissonance.* To relieve this tension, . . . people often bring their attitudes in line with their actions. It's as if people rationalize, "If I chose to do it (or say it), I must believe in it." The less coerced and more responsible we feel for a troubling act, the more dissonance we feel. The more dissonance we feel, the more motivated we are to find consistency, such as by changing our attitudes to help justify the act.[59]

Cognitive dissonance's specific problem in religious matters in general, and for hard pluralism in particular, lies in the difference between what adepts have always held to be a true belief and a move towards accepting the far ranging calls made by hard religious pluralism to alter their beliefs. This difficulty is addressed by William Epstein and Franklin Shontz when they explain that

> [w]e generally expect people to behave in ways consistent with their beliefs, and to harbor only beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts that are consonant with each other. Given no outside restraints on his behavior, we expect the person who goes to church regularly to agree with the beliefs of the religious group to which he belongs. Conversely, we expect the person who espouses religious causes to go to church or to display in public concrete behavioral evidence of his commitment . . . In short, we expect consonance between behavior and belief . . . we expect, and usually find, consonance within a person's belief systems, as well as between his beliefs and actions, and among his actions on various occasions.[60]

Thus we should expect and experience a certain consistency between what we practice and what we preach. We would certainly notice exceptions in others just as they would note the same inconsistencies between our own beliefs and our actions. There are a certain harmony and balance between what we say or believe and what we actually do, and this harmony is consonance.

The question for Hick now becomes one of consistency. Can I attend my religious institution, follow its dogmas, and participate in its liturgical practices while dismantling its core beliefs and traditions?[61] Hick's hard religious pluralism seems to be dramatically at odds with the idea of consonance. He is a Christian theologian (an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church of

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[59] David G. Myers, *Psychology,* 5th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 1998), 554. See Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,* 1st ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

[60] William Epstein and Franklin Shontz, *Psychology in Progress* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1971), 270.

[61] For instance, was the death of Christ on the cross the means of salvation, or just an untimely end for a political dissident? If the latter is the case, the Christian celebration of Eucharist (or communion) loses its significance.

England) on the one hand, presumably one who must work within the confines of established Christian doctrines and confessional dogmatics, and, on the other hand, a voice calling out for a radical revision of the Christian faith in order to immerse believers in the pool of pluralism and its waters of moral evolution.

But what happens when we embrace hard religious pluralism while retaining one foot in the camp of long held religious beliefs? For this is what accepting hard religious pluralism ultimately entails—otherwise we would rush headlong towards hard religious pluralism and leave our religions' histories and backgrounds behind as relics of an unenlightened period of human history. Epstein and Shontz address this eventuality when they say,

> we also know of situations in which consonance does not exist. The narcotics addict goes on taking drugs even though he knows they are harmful and wants to quit. The same people who profess on Sunday to believe the ten commandments proceed on Monday to break most of them. The political speaker tells us his nation is dedicated to world peace, and then justifies a war that lasts for over 15 years. . . . All such cases display a characteristic called *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957).
>
> In this context, cognition means knowledge one has about himself or the world in which he lives. Dissonance exists when cognitive elements are mutually contradictory, that is, when an individual "knows" two things that are inconsistent.[62]

Such dissonance, if unchecked, can unleash untold human misery and consequences. It would seem that any move to embrace a new paradigm of religious belief requires abandonment or revision of former tenets that presumably benefitted their holders in some way. Such a process must be fraught with rising dissonance through many of its stages. It is possible that Hick's hard religious pluralism might be connected to this situation, and I will consider it further in the following chapter on faith and belief.[63]

Returning now to the voluntary acceptance of religious diversity mentioned above (p. 35), Plantinga explains:

> Now there are several possible reactions to awareness of religious diversity. One is to continue to believe—what you have all along believed; you learn about this diversity but continue to believe that is, take to be true—such propositions as [those you have always held] . . . , consequently taking to be false any beliefs, religious or otherwise, that are incompatible with [them]. Following current practice, I will call this *exclusivism*; the exclusivist holds that the tenets or some of the tenets of *one* religion—Christianity, let's say—are in fact true; he adds, naturally enough, that any propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false.[64]

Plantinga has stated the common exclusivist view which Hick, and other pluralists, would see as a rejection of all religions outside of that held by a particular believer. The law of the excluded

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[62] Ibid.

[63] While I address the rise of cognitive dissonance in religion, I approach the subject from a Western perspective. However, I do not believe we can discount its presence in the Eastern religions, but I expect it might be handled there with less emotion and visible challenges to orthodox claims.

[64] Plantinga, Exclusivism, 509.

middle would certainly hold here in that if one believes one thing to be true, and another believes its contradictory to be true, they cannot both be true; and one, or both, must be false. Thus, what I will refer to as the *hard religious exclusivist* position seems to compel us to accept Hick's premise that there is a problem that underlies the current conceptions of the great religious traditions. This is because they hold mutually exclusive truth claims, none of which can be true without serious revision or reinterpretation to synthesize their underlying essences. Hick believes this will demonstrate a core commonality which transcends their dogmatic postulations.[65]

But what we might actually see here is the possibility that a *soft form of religious exclusivism* might evolve in which, after having examined the truth claims of other religions, one simply continues to believe in the truth claims of her own religious beliefs while acknowledging that others have their own and differing beliefs, but not condemning them as false or inferior. However, Plantinga rejects this position on the grounds that to hold such a belief in the veracity of one's own religion entails finding others' contradictory views to be false. Thus, he rejects outright Hick's postulation that we might be speaking metaphorically when we differ on truth claims in religion.[66]

For Plantinga, hard religious exclusivism is not itself an oppressive viewpoint since it is to be expected that others will indeed often reject our own points of view as well. If we ourselves are not required to accept an opposing view, neither are those whose views we might oppose. The resulting view then is that holders of particular points of view are naturally inclined to believe that those who disagree with them will be guilty of holding false viewpoints. And those who fail to grasp what we find fundamentally significant are lacking something of great importance, thereby making our own position somewhat privileged.

It should be obvious at this point that Hick's hard pluralistic approach will have ramifications beyond his laudable goals of a pluralistic religious world view and recognition that many religions have valid claims to truth. Certainly, beliefs in the superiority of one's position, especially at the expense or denigration of others, are no indicators of the veracity of the opinion and are liable to moral objections. But there may well be valid reasons for supposing that they have value for the one who believes them. This aspect will be pursued later in this investigation.

Here we can see something of the lines drawn between Hick and other hard religious pluralists, on the one hand, and Plantinga and hard religious exclusivists on the other. If we are to be open to the possibility that others hold substantial truth claims in their own religious systems, we must inevitably be prepared to review and perhaps even reassess the veracity of our own claims. This now sets the stage for further inquiries regarding the three questions I originally posed in the introduction to this thesis: 1) Am I open to the possibility that other religions contain some truth, or, conversely, can I accept that my own religion does not have the whole truth? 2) If the answer to question one is yes, do I have to give up some of my own religious beliefs? and 3) What is the effect on my faith if I abandon or modify my beliefs?

Before leaving the exclusivist question, it is important to emphasize that it is but one of a

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[65] If we take it to be the case, rather, that they are all false, we are left with an entirely different problem, but that may be the purview of the atheist to solve.

[66] See Hick, *Metaphor.*

number of responses to Hick's hard religious pluralism. Its extreme expression, in Plantinga, leaves little room for compromise, but it might also be the case that a soft religious exclusivism, mentioned earlier, could obtain. That is to say, one might well be able to acknowledge that, while other systems likely have legitimate truth claims of their own which might seem to be opposed to the ones with which a believer is most familiar, such systems are seen to hold value and work in the lives of their believers. But the believer will continue to hold to the veracity of her own beliefs simply because (a) they have not been disproved to her, and (b) because they work in some way for her. Adopting such a stance would mesh well with the soft pluralism that I have suggested.[67] The believer could continue to embrace her own beliefs while acknowledging and appreciating the beliefs of others, no matter how divergent they might seem: she sees some points of contact; she acknowledges the degree of ethical and moral behaviour in others as a result of their own beliefs; and she is not committed to converting others to her religion, just as she is not prepared to forego the beliefs of her own.[68] The soft religious pluralist might be seen at interfaith dialogues, interfaith prayer services, and interfaith community events and projects, but she will still maintain her traditional religious beliefs because they have value for her and they provide what she needs from the religious aspect of her life.

The next consideration which I direct to Hick's hypothesis deals with what is meant by transcendence. This is crucial to any critique of Hick if for no other reason than that we need to know if it is even possible to know anything beyond our everyday phenomenological experiences.[69] If there is a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, it is unlikely we can ever know it as it is, and we must therefore be given some clues about its existence and purpose within our own spheres of reference. The very concept of transcendence lies outside of limited human knowledge and seems to defy description, thus leading to cultural and theological ambiguity in our attempts to relate to it or to confirm our experience of it. We do the best that we can to address the idea/experience of transcendence, and some descriptions or conceptions are more successful than others. The problem is further exacerbated

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[67] I believe there is a distinction to be made here between soft religious pluralism and soft religious exclusivism: in the former case, a believer could hold to the truth of her traditional beliefs and acknowledge others in their own but differing beliefs because she acknowledges the moral character-building of those beliefs and the positive effects they have on adherents; she might even acknowledge that they are different paths to the same ultimate reality even though she believes hers is the only right one for her. In the latter case, the believer might hold to the truth of her own belief system while simply acknowledging that those who hold differing truth claims are working within systems that accommodate their own religious needs and desires. While both positions allow the believer to continue to have faith in the veracity and efficacy of her traditional religious beliefs, the soft pluralist position is open to the possibility of other equally valid belief systems; the soft religious exclusivist position is less positive but is more willing to allow others the possibility of a worthwhile religious belief system that lies outside of her understanding and experience of religious truth than does the hard religious exclusivist position.

[68] For an in-depth comparison, analysis, and criticism of pluralism, exclusivism, and inclusivism (a position which length precludes from examining in this thesis) see: Ogden, *Religion*. Ogden refutes the foregoing positions and holds that there is a "fourth option" which is that the love of God transcends all of humanity and that all religions that respond to God's love are each valid and true expressions of the truth of this love. Unfortunately, his position is clearly "Christocentric" and fails to take note of the non-theistic religions.

[69] Hick, throughout his works, divides individuals into two main groups: 1) those who discount any force behind what they experience in the world, especially in nature, and 2) those who come to believe in a creative or generative force behind the natural world. This latter force is what transcends our everyday experience of the world.

when seemingly contradictory systems of thought approach this subject. Hick has rightly pointed out the disjunction between theistic and non-theistic approaches to the Transcendent Ultimate Reality.[70]

And herein lies a central concern about this or any other thesis that attempts to place humanity within the realm of transcendent conceptualization. What we are dealing with here, to address it from a slightly different perspective, is the supernatural. The supernatural necessarily lies beyond our daily awareness; we try to deal with it and explain it as ably as our cultures and individual experiences allow. Thus we are led into a dilemma of sorts: those holding diverging views can say something about what they think the supernatural is, and, in doing so, each might be right, or both might be wrong, or one right while the other is wrong, but they may never be certain of which is the actual case; or they can give up the quest altogether and dwell in the realm of phenomenological/everyday experience making the best guesses they can about the Transcendent Ultimate Reality based on their limited conceptual abilities.[71] For instance, while the atheist and the theist hold opposing views regarding the existence, or non-existence, of God they will both work out the rationale of their respective positions from within their own referential frameworks. That being the case, Hick's attempts at revision in order to promote the hard religious pluralist hypothesis rely heavily upon the effects of the transcendent or the supernatural being something that can be labeled or definitively conceptualized, but no one can say with the utmost certainty that the transcendent even exists or what its role really is in a particular religious tradition. It has historically been up to each individual faith to address the question and incorporate the answer into its own belief system.

Before we begin a closer critique of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, it must be remembered that it in part hinges on the role of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality which may or may not be identical to his use of an Ultimate Reality.[72] If, as I take to be his meaning, all religious development can be traced to a single source, the Transcendent Ultimate Reality of the universe which chose to reveal

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[70] See: "Transcendence." Kelly Clark, Richard Lints and James Smith, eds. *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

[71] Hick follows Kant's view that "the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness." Hick, *Interpretation,* 242.

[72] There is a shift in Hick's nomenclature as his thesis develops over the course of his many books and articles. In the earliest postulation of the pluralistic hypothesis, in *Faiths*, he refers to the source of revelation as "the ultimate," "divine revelation," "God," "divine reality," "divine self-revelation," "the divine," "the divine will," "the ultimate divine reality," and "the one infinite reality." Hick uses these terms a total of twenty five times throughout the fourteen pages of this chapter. However, he only refers to "the transcendent" twice. The notion of the words in the former list, while, of course, being somewhat removed from our human abilities to comprehend a being behind them, still allows a degree of familiarity that enables us to relate to a *divine presence* which can touch humanity in some way. But Hick's later move to the use of a "Transcendent Reality," clearly in an attempt to address and include non-theistic traditions seems to postulate a being even further removed from one with which humans can have any meaningful experience or knowledge. Thus my point that, in attempting to be pluralistic, Hick seems to rely first on a conceivable being as a source of revelation (a primarily theistic position), but later relies on a Transcendent being as the ground of all religion. This latter development underlies his major work, *Interpretation.* To support his newest iteration of the source of revelation for the pluralist position, but also to continue in his claim to be a Christian theologian, Hick has to maintain his balance while having a foot in each camp. The only way he can continue to do so is to radically revise Christian traditions and beliefs. The effects of these revisions will be addressed in the following chapter.

something of itself to our ancestors, we might naturally wish to explain how such revelations have diverged. Thus Hick, as noted earlier in his concern about our limited ability to conceptualize the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, wishes to "distinguish between the Eternal One in itself, in its eternal self-existent being, beyond relationship to a creation, and the Eternal One in relation to mankind and as perceived from within our different human cultural situations" (p. 23). Of course, his purpose here is twofold: to defuse disagreements over questions relating to the creation or non-creation of the universe and also to raise the possibility that mutually exclusive truth claims may originate in part from our mistaken perceptions, or views, of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality which stem from human cognitive limitations. We can only hope to grasp a part of the essence of something as ethereal as the concept of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality. I expect that most would agree with this analysis, whether or not it is sufficient to explain how religions could differ so greatly from a single source of revelation.

But what is the difference, if any, between "the Eternal One in itself" and "the Eternal One in relation to humanity"? Are there two Eternal Ones? For Hick, the former is related to the non-theistic religions and the latter to the theistic religions. While we might presume that he is simply making a statement that would lessen the tension between theistic and non-theistic religions, there is more to this concept that needs to be addressed. His purpose might initially have been to simply introduce one term and use it in two ways (something he has often been accused of doing) to bolster these divergent systems' sources of divine revelation. However, we now have the idea of "the Eternal" taking on two distinct contexts. Hick's comments have introduced the concept of a transcendent reality that needs further examination. Quite likely, the simplest explanation is that there is only one Transcendent Ultimate Reality, a reality quite unknowable by humans in itself (*an sich*), but partially revealed to humanity through some means of revelation—the Ultimate Reality to which we generally refer, perhaps. However, it seems that Hick must move away from postulating a knowable God, the God of theistic religion, and postulate a more remote essence to which all religions can relate. This move can be found even in his earliest offering of the pluralistic hypothesis when he quotes Rudolf Otto quoting Meister Eckhart: "What is here insisted upon is not so much an immanent God, as an 'experienced' God, known as an inward principle of the power of new being and life. Eckhart knows this *deuteros theos* besides the personal God."[73] If we translate the Greek as "a second god," the stage is set for a re-evaluation of the revelatory Ultimate Reality and a shift to a Transcendent Ultimate Reality quite unknowable by most of us in any practical way. I am not saying here that Hick postulates two separate entities but that he must give up the theistic notion of the source of Ultimate Reality, which is the early ground of his post axial hypothesis, and look past it to something even more encompassing of all religious thought and practice in order to promote and maintain his pluralistic hypothesis.

Another way to look at this question of *transcendent knowability* is found in Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. This work somewhat parallels Hick's axial age thesis concerning the unitary origins of the great world religions. I will refer to Huston Smith's excellent introduction to Schuon and his explanation of religious diversity amidst a focal point of transcendent revelation. As Smith diagrams the position, we can imagine a baseline upon which the great religions

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[73] Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West,* trans. Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 131, cited in Hick, *Faiths,* 145.

are placed somewhat apart from each other, and we can then draw lines upwards from each of them to a common point or apex, which would represent their unitary source. Thus we can conceptualize how they diverge from a single point. But if we then imagine another horizontal line drawn across the lines of religious development somewhere between the apex and the baseline, we can postulate that what lies above it is the "esoteric" aspect of religious thought and that lying below is the "exoteric" aspect. According to Smith, the esoteric lies above the plane that divides religious types: "it is hidden and secret not because those who know will not tell, but because the truth to which they are privy is buried so deep in the human composite that they cannot communicate it, not in any way the majority will find convincing."[74] Here I take esoteric to be speech that is restricted to those with special knowledge or abilities and exoteric to refer to that which is more readily available to anyone in general. So Schuon draws a line somewhere between religious unity and plurality, and asks "how the two domains [are] to be related?"[75] Smith says,

> Schuon draws the line between esoteric and exoteric. And immediately we begin to suspect that we are in the presence of something different. The fundamental distinction is not between religions; it is not, so to speak, a line that, reappearing, divides religion's great historical manifestations vertically, Hindus from Buddhists from Christians from Muslims, and so on. The dividing line is horizontal and occurs but once, cutting across the historical religions. Above the line lies esoterism, below it exoterism.
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> It could be objected that this horizontal line is not as original as it might appear; the thesis that religions are alike at heart or in essence (read "esoterically") while differing in form ("exoterically") has often been advanced [as Hick has done]. The point is well taken; we do not arrive at Schuon's originality until we ask into the nature of religion's generic essence or (in the title of this book) transcendent unity.
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> For Schuon existence is graded, and with it cognition as well. Metaphysically, in God at the apex, religions . . . converge; below they differ. The epistemological concomitant of this metaphysical fact is that religious discernment, too, unites at this apex while dividing below it.[76]

Schuon's thesis, while supporting Hick's postulation of a unitary origin of religions from a single transcendent source, also addresses the knowability problem mentioned above. If we are limited in our ability to accurately cognize the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, as Hick supposes, it is not surprising that cultural and historical influences may impact the degree of divergence on the baseline of religious truth claims. Several problems arise here. First, at what point should the line of esoteric/exoteric distinction be placed? Surely it cannot be a straight line since revelation, if it were the same for each group, would not have become distorted at the same time and to the same degree everywhere. And second, how could such a Transcendent Ultimate Reality impart knowledge of itself to mere humans in the first place? Were there special members of the human species created or selected who were especially susceptible to the reception of a transcendent revelation, and was the revelation imparted to them alone?

While Hick does not address these questions directly, they are of utmost importance to his

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[74] Huston Smith, "Introduction to the Revised Edition," in Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions,* rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), xi (hereafter cited as *Transcendent Unity*).

[75] Ibid., xi.

[76] Ibid., xi-xii.

goal of reducing religious differences. Schuon faces the problem by postulating persons as spiritual types. If we were all esoterics, we would be able to confront revelations from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality together and we would not differ in our views of the Absolute, so that there would be "religious unity on the esoteric plane" as noted earlier.[77] Perhaps these are the *types* that received Hick's original revelation so long ago. To build further upon Schuon's hypothesis, religions that might have sprung up within communities of *esoteric types*, who presumably could understand or communicate their experiences of the transcendent with each other, would not be expected to exhibit the religious diversity or exclusivity that we have today. But few of us, if any, fit this spiritual type. We might ascribe this way of addressing transcendence to the mystics found in most religious systems, but even they, as Hick has pointed out, speak in terms that lie within their own current and divergent religious systems, thus casting suspicion upon the source of their experience—unless, of course, they deliberately couch their experiences of transcendence in terms with which their followers are culturally and religiously familiar. For Schuon,

> this esoteric minority consists of men and women who realize that they have their roots in the Absolute. Either they experience the identification directly or, failing this, they stand within earshot of its claim; something within them senses that the claim is true even if they cannot validate it completely. The exoteric majority is composed of the remainder of mankind for whom this way of talking about religion is sterile if not unintelligible.[78]

We therefore have a division of religious humanity into two types. The scarce esoteric types seemingly have no need to develop systems of religion to address revelation if they are in direct awareness of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality. They express this awareness directly in their manner of being and knowing. But the exoteric group will dimly, if at all, grasp revelation, and it needs to translate this according to human cognitive abilities and phenomenological awareness (through its experience and awareness of the world) dictated through the world around it. It could well be, then, that the evolution of religious diversity stems from how the second group rationalizes or comes to terms with revelation within the various cultures that have evolved down through the march of time in human development.

There is also what Schuon describes as an ambivalent attitude between these two groups towards each other. A further possibility that explains the mechanism of religious diversity is founded upon this ambivalence. Smith explains Schuon's view here as follows:

> The esoteric will honor the exoteric's faith, for he will see it as invested in scripture and/or incarnation that truly are God's revelations. He will not, however be able to share the exoteric's conviction that the text or life in which he encounters his revelation is the only, or in any event supreme, mode in which God has spoken. The exoteric's assessment of the esoteric is likely to be less charitable, not because exoterics are less endowed with that virtue, but because, a portion of the esoteric position being obscured from him, he cannot honor it without betraying the truth he does see. If, as the esoteric maintains, Revelation has multiple and equal instances, no single instance can be absolute. But single instance—be it Christ, the Koran, or whatever—is what the exoteric's faith is anchored in, so esoterism looms as exoterism's subverter. It is in this light that Christianity's

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[77] See footnote 19. What will, of course differ, is the exoteric, or formal, views of religious truth as formulated through culture and religious dogma over time.

[78] Schuon, *Transcendent Unity,* xv.

ambivalence toward its mystics and Islam's toward its Sufis, to the point even of crucifying an Al-Hallāj, are to be understood.[79]

Here we see agreement with Hick that revelation was likely given in multiple instances, but we also see that there is a certain tension between mysticism and everyday religious practice. Additionally, we also see a mention of the truth, or the various truths, that are entrenched in the beliefs of religious adherents. The exoteric will find truth in the dogmas of her religion and its scriptural underpinnings from which these dogmas find their support. She will invest her energy in what she can grasp of its truth claims, in what has been developed for her by those who have gone down this path before her (we can see here both the soft religious pluralist and soft religious exclusivist camps). On the other hand, the esoteric claims direct and continuous knowledge of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality which he will apply to his own being as a truth about the Absolute, well beyond the strictures of dogmatic religion (a hard religious pluralist might be found here). However, it remains of the utmost importance that we always return once again to the position that whatever religion is, it must do or provide for something in the life of the person who claims it as her own. That is, whether one is esoteric or exoteric in one's religious approach and understanding, the very fabric of that understanding must provide something that impacts positively on one's daily existence.

The esoteric may have a unique connection with the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, but as this is her unique experience alone, the exoteric cannot claim it, insist on receiving it, or even experience it through sheer determination. Thus the exoteric must take whatever religious concepts she can deduce from her limited knowledge or awareness of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, or the dogmas of religious institutions that have previously been formulated for her, and apply them in meaningful ways which will relate directly to her own life and society. Not surprisingly these applications will be tempered by cultural and historical influences. Smith further describes Schuon's analysis:

> Man does not dwell in pure immediacy; he lives in a world of symbolic forms. Transcendence can appear on the human plane only through these forms; it cannot appear directly because it transcends by definition the plane's spatiotemporal categories. Symbols for their part consist of a form/content complex. Exoterics are persons whose meanings derive from forms that are more restricted in scope than those of esoterics. One is tempted to say that their forms are more concrete, but this could be misleading, for it would imply that esoteric forms are, in contrast, abstract and hence vacuous—shells of reality only, so to speak. Beyond a certain level of generality symbols do appear abstract in this denatured sense to exoterics, but to esoterics they remain full bodied, if anything thereby gaining in force and reality.[80]

For Schuon, the esoterics, whose experience is more immediate and less limited, therefore express transcendent revelations in symbolic terms understandable to their communities. Whether these symbols (creeds) are directed towards salvation or liberation, they are culturally influenced through the effects of a culture's philosophy which stem from vastly divergent circumstances. The Western religions adopted the Platonic soul as something eternal within an individual and then

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[79] Ibid., xv-xvi.

[80] Ibid., xxiv-xxv.

devised a more hospitable eternal home for it to distance it from the cold darkness of eternity in Sheol or Hades; there was hope offered in the idea of salvation leading to an eternal and heavenly paradise. In the East, the problems of the caste system were addressed from a different perspective. The doctrine of karma, which allowed one to improve herself until she could reach total awareness and liberation from suffering and physical bonds, arose within its evolving systems of religions.

These symbols and metaphors, especially Hick's reliance on metaphors of language to describe something like the divinity of Christ, do have their limitations. For instance, Smith takes Schuon to mean that when Christ said, " 'No man cometh unto the Father, but by me,' men divide. For esoterics 'me' will designate the Logos. For exoterics, less supple in their capacity for 'spiritual abstraction,' in precise proportion as the word relaxes its hold on the concrete historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth, the assertion forfeits its saving power."[81] In this case Schuon takes it that only a nuanced understanding of dogma has any transcendent meaning, and there is little if any meaning for those who cannot grasp such concepts—they are mistaken in their beliefs about the divisive concepts of religious language as Hick postulates in his theory that what appear to be divergent claims may have a unitary source of truth behind them. That is to say, esoterics, while understanding the concept of Christ as *Logos*, would not be limited in their understanding to his one historical incarnation as exoterics would.

But even the spiritually experienced must operate within the strictures of a communal existence;[82] in doing so they will attempt to conform their transcendental knowledge and experiences to life within the religious communities to which they belong. In this vein, Smith understands that

> [t]o speak less metaphorically, negatively Schuon doubts that transcendent Truth, the Reality common to the great religions, is directly accessible to many; the mentality of most men and women being exoteric, their choice is between, on the one hand, a faith that is patently exoteric, and on the other, sentimental infatuation with rosy abstractions, this latter resembling being in love with love itself or taking as one's prophet Khalil Gibran. Positively Schuon argues that even esoterics must, almost without exception, submit to exoteric rites. Forms are to be transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them. One might regard them as doorways to be entered, or rather as windows, for the esoteric doesn't leave them behind, but continues to look through them toward the Absolute. But because the symbolism of the spirit always requires that, in the end, space (distance) be transcended, even this will not do. The esoteric finds the Absolute within the traditions as poets find poetry in poems.[83]

The message here is that religious developments, symbols, and beliefs were developments that arose to address specific cultural needs within particular communities or cultures. But the esoterics have received a greater understanding of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality through such limited forms. That is to say, esoterics, living more closely on the fringes of society, were touched by the transcendent and attempted to maintain or deepen these levels of contact, whereas the majority of the population adapted what it could understand of esoteric experience to make religion do something

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[81] Ibid., xxv. Jn. 14:6.

[82] Perhaps with the exception of certain religious notables like the desert fathers and mothers of the early years of Christianity for instance.

[83] Ibid., xxiv.

positive and meaningful in daily life, something that would prepare the way for the hope and assurance of something after death. What Hick appears to be addressing in his thesis is how dogmas has arisen, through the work of religious professionals, that have both codified and concretized certain religious beliefs to the point that they are mutually exclusive and problematic for interfaith harmony. But then again, it may indeed be necessary for beliefs in one religion to differ from those of others. For instance, Schuon himself says that

> [r]eturning to the question of the relative incompatibility between the different religious forms and more particularly between certain of them, we may add that it is necessary that one form should to some extent misinterpret the others, since the reason for the existence of a religion, from one point of view at least, is to be found precisely in those things wherein it differs from other religions. Divine Providence has permitted no mingling of the revealed forms since the time when humanity became divided into different "humanities" and moved away from the Primordial Tradition, the only unique religion possible. For example, the Moslem misinterpretation of the Christian dogma of the Trinity is providential, since the doctrine contained in this dogma is essentially and exclusively esoteric and is not capable of being "exotericized" in any way whatever; Islam had therefore to limit the expansion of this dogma, but this in no way prejudices the existence, within Islam of the universal truth that is expressed by the dogma in question.[84]

Certainly, if religion is to be purposeful within a society it must address what that society has received and provide something the society needs. In the case of Christianity, the dogma of the Trinity has long puzzled many mainstream believers and is best considered a mystery. But within this dogma, the divinity and thus the authority of Christ is established, and it is from this authority and fact that his teachings and ultimate purpose in the lives of followers takes form and applies to their daily lives, whether through moral principles or through hope for salvation. Perhaps the potential soft religious exclusivist can continue to find solace in her faith; holding on to her traditional truth claims can continue to make a meaningful contribution to her daily existence. She will continue to take comfort in her belief system's efficacy to guide her to her eschatological goals, but she can also acknowledge such an assurance in the lives of others even without believing them to have the same authority or results as her tradition.

We are now at the stage to develop further objections to the pluralistic hypothesis, as Hick offers it, but also within the transcendent hypothesis of Schuon. Both of these hypotheses presuppose a unitary source of transcendent revelation. That is to say, while they both note the current climate of religious differences, of mutually exclusive truth claims about religious dogmas, even such phenomena as national religions (Islam for Arabs and Judaism for Jews), they postulate these as divergences from a single source of revelation. The questions arising from this, then, concern why such a revelation came so mysteriously in the first place and why such divergences were allowed to happen or continue. Surely something so imbued with power as the Transcendent Ultimate Reality that lies behind the very universe itself, given that it could, or did, choose to reveal itself to ancient humanity, would have done so in such a way that it could be known or interpreted in such a fashion that it would be more readily understood by a greater majority of humanity. That is to say, why was its diverse dissemination of its existence only given to those few who presumably were remotely capable of grasping it as Schuon postulates? If the Transcendent Ultimate Reality was indeed limited

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[84] Ibid., 22-23.

in its ability to make its presence known, it must shortly have become an irrelevant factor in religious development—if we got it wrong and can never hope to get it right, and acknowledging that we are "religious animals by nature,"[85] we might as well continue to develop religious thinking along any lines that offer hope and that work in some way for us.

I will now raise what I believe is an additional problem for Hick's analogy of the blind men and the elephant. Hick would have it that the Ultimate Transcendent Reality is knowable in itself,[86] just as an elephant in a room should be to an unimpaired observer; it is our limited abilities or defective approaches that cause us to miss the mark. Hick uses this failure on our part to imply that religious diversity, while grasping something of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, is in effect simply a cultural mask that obscures the actual reality behind the metaphors of religious language. In other words, the esoterics have not accurately explained the transcendent reality, or the exoterics have simply moved beyond the truth into a falsehood and adapted it for their own purposes. But at the end of the day, the blind men are all simply mistaken about what they attempt to identify. It is in fact an elephant, not a collection of parts, and certainly not a collection of mistakenly identified parts. Just as an elephant cannot be reduced to its parts, especially when they are examined through faulty inputs, and still be what it is, the Transcendent Ultimate Reality also is what it is, whether or not we can ever hope to see or know it clearly. The individual observations of the blind persons may constitute subjective forms of truth, but the fact is they are still all mistaken. It appears Hick is entering a quagmire of relativism and epistemological sleight of hand in this view when he tries to resolve conflicting religious truth claims by turning them into something that is always basically in agreement at its core. He uses his theory of divine origins to synthesize valid differences into an organized whole that must somehow underlie all religious truths. The fact remains, world religions vary to such a degree that they often remain mutually exclusive. Hick, like his forebears in the science of religion, attempts to introduce a "grand scheme" of religion that will, with one wave of the hand, account for all that religion is or can be for its practitioners. The use of the elephant analogy is flawed because, on the one hand, it suggests that the Transcendent Ultimate Reality could be knowable, and, on the other hand, that it is mischievous or even malevolent—it teases us with a minimal awareness of itself, or in its transcendent actuality it deliberately created us to fall short of knowing it.

This latter observation raises questions of knowability, or whether anyone can truly hope to know the Transcendent Ultimate Reality in the first place. In his later work, Hick seems to abandon the knowability of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, strictly because of the problems of language or concepts when he says,

> let us suppose, as a thought experiment, that the Real has its analogues of the various attributes of the heavenly Parent, which will include personality, love, goodness, compassion, justice, mercy, power, intentions, consciousness, knowledge. We now have to add that the Real also has its analogues of the attributes of its other authentic personae and impersonae. But this quickly leads to manifest contradictions. The description of the Real will now have to include its being analogically personal and also its being analogically non-personal, analogically conscious and also analogically non-conscious, analogically purposive and also analogically non-

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[85] Hick, *Faiths,* 133.

[86] An additional problem with this analogy is Hick's Kantian dependence on the Real *an sich* which, when he relates it to the noumenal, cannot be grasped after all.

purposive, analogous to a substance and also analogous to a non-substantial process, and so on. The more you add to the list the more incoherent it becomes. So rather than get into such a morass of impossibilities it seems to me that we should acknowledge that all these attributes are components of our human conceptual repertoire, and is thus from our point of view ineffable or formless. It has its own nature, presumably infinite in richness, but that nature is not thinkable in our human terms—and indeed even the concept of a nature, or an essence, belongs to the network of human concepts which the Real totally transcends. . . . If there is a reality beyond the range of our experience we have no reason to think that our system of experiential concepts applies to it; and if we regard the major religious traditions as humanly conditioned responses to such a reality we have a reason to think that these concepts do *not* apply to it—namely, as I pointed out just now, that if they did it would have mutually contradictory attributes, such as being personal and being non-personal, being a creator and not being a creator, and so on. So if, in the view of their fruits in human life, you regard Buddhism, advaitic Hinduism, and Taoism, as well as the theistic faiths, as responses to the ultimate, you must postulate a reality to which these conceptual dualisms do not apply, although it is nevertheless humanly thought and experienced by means of them.[87]

It seems Hick is caught in a contradiction here. He formerly theorized that all the world religions (a) arose from a point in time in which there was a revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality and (b) then diverged historically and culturally from it over time. But he now says that we could not have hoped to remotely understand its ineffable nature in the first place. That being the case, it seems unlikely that religions diverged from a common truth because, most likely, the truth of the revelation could not have been entirely understood or grasped. If that is the reality of the origins of religion, these origins are so murky that they cannot be located no matter how much Hick wishes to revise the language of religion to account for today's mutually exclusive truth claims. He cannot support the claim that there is a kernel of truth underlying all religious differences if the very nature of the source of such truth is unknowable. At least Schuon postulates the esoteric type who might access the Transcendent Ultimate Reality in some meaningful or comprehensible way, but Hick never seems to give this ability any credence.

What we are left with, then, is the claim that all the world's great religions stem from a single or unitary revelation that most likely came from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, but, by its very nature, this important revelation may have been entirely unknowable by most and only vaguely grasped by some: Schuon's esoterics perhaps. That being the case, the argument about the unitary nature of many religious beliefs stemming from the same origin may be premature. Perhaps these similarities arise from similar sociological needs that were impressed upon the psyche of humans within their otherwise diverse cultures which eventually gave rise to ritualistic expression, both public and private. The resulting effects on morality and character may have been more sociological than religious in that a harmonious and functioning society would obviously benefit from individuals treating others with dignity, respect, tolerance, and even love. If failing to do so would carry sanctions, especially through offending the god(s) or the order of nature, individuals might naturally turn to the divine for direction and support as they matured and dealt with others in their societal groupings. In doing so, attributes of goodness, love, and omniscience would quite naturally be applied to the Transcendent Ultimate Reality which was deemed to be responsible for creating humans, and for supporting and correcting them as needed. Perhaps it is the case that our current

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[87]   John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: John Knox Westminster Press, 1995), 62-64 (hereafter cited as *Rainbow*).

religious practices have arisen more from a pragmatic source, a necessity to develop human relationships, than from an unknowable transcendence emanating instructions to a few esoterics. But what better way for social leaders to claim obedience to a set of norms than to invoke a Transcendent Ultimate Reality as their author and themselves as its interpreters?

Arising from Hick's premise that religions flow from a single source are his observations of the results obtained by, and shown in, the lives of their followers. Hick observes that many people from vastly different religious backgrounds exhibit high degrees of moral character and basic goodness. He attributes the source of these common traits to the Transcendent Ultimate Reality he believes lies behind each of them, thus deducing that a common Transcendent Ultimate Reality forms the basis of all religions and that it causes or creates the positive characteristics of its followers. But Hick also notes that, even though the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is ineffable, religious followers, presumably because of their good character, ascribe goodness to it. That is, the Transcendent Ultimate Reality creates people of good character (through religious systems), and people of good character are drawn to participate more fully in religious systems that create good character. From this stance comes a charge of circularity. For Hick, religious individuals are good because the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is good and the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is good because it produces good individuals.[88] To reconcile this circularity, one is tempted once again to ask if Hick envisages a duality of Ultimate Realities, the one transcendent and unknowable, the other roughly equating to the knowable Ultimate Reality addressed by many of the world's great religions. I do not believe that this is what Hick has in mind and that leaves us with the issue of the circularity problem.

Another epistemological problem arises when the validity of a religion is argued from its exhibition of miracles. While David Hume discounts miracles—since a valid miracle is a violation of a law of nature, which he presupposes to negate the possibility of miracles occurring[89]—many of the world's great religions make claims for them within their world views. Surely, a religion that encompasses miraculous events would be one that a follower would tend to hold as special and certainly valid. Whether or not miracles, or violations of the laws of nature do occur, they are logically possible, according to J.L. Mackie, even if one is not justified in believing in them.[90] But the point here is that both the soft religious exclusivist, or pluralist, could find the claims of miracles in other religions to be grounds for allowing their validity for their adherents. Surely a transcendent being, usually attributed with unlimited powers, could interrupt the natural course of events, say by isolating time for an individual to allow for a rapid healing of a wound or illness, which would then take on the aura of a miracle. While Hick acknowledges the development of individuals of high moral character under the influence of a religious upbringing or culture, what about the turnaround of the most egregious reprobate who, having come under the influence of a religion (finding God), turns his life around to such a degree that those who knew him in his earlier life would not be able

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[88] *Euthyphro.*

[89] See David Hume, "Against Miracles," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1748).

[90] See J. L. Mackie, "Miracles and Testimony," in *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

to account for the miraculous change in his present state? Perhaps the concept of miracles may relate to Hick's questions of religious language more than to actual historical facts, but for many religions, miracles are real and fundamental parts of their histories and beliefs. The problem of miracles, of course, is that they tend to underscore one's faith in the veracity of one's own particular religion, especially when a seemingly miraculous event causes one religious force to triumph over an opposing one. Hick's extensive writings, especially his later works, fail to address this problem.

That being the case, and in spite of mutually exclusive truth claims, the question of miracles in a religious system needs to be addressed by Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Does the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, the one credited for miracles, do so under various guises, or does the concept of miracles denote a number of different Transcendent Ultimate Realities which are each capable of miraculous deeds? I strongly doubt that Hick would agree with the latter case, but he does suggest that miracles are not valid proofs for the existence of God. However, in answering criticisms about metaphysical beliefs, Hick does raise the possibility of the belief in miracles when he comments that

> [i]t's certainly true that science presupposes an orderly universe, functioning according to regularities which can be observed, so that experiments can be devised and explanatory theories developed. But all the great world faiths see the world process as proceeding in an orderly and law-governed way; and both ancient Chinese and mediaeval Islamic science made some real progress. None of the world faiths sees the universe as a chaos that is unamenable to systematic observation and theorizing—although most of them, including Christianity, have also believed in miracles which arbitrarily disrupt the order of nature and are thus incompatible with the scientific project.[91]

Since miracles are often fundamental questions of faith, it is surprising that Hick's writings have so little to say about them. The acceptance of one's own religion's history of miracles and the rejection of them in another system would offer more support for his call to look beyond our own parochial views and acknowledge that other religions also make claims to supernatural intervention. One of the few Hickean references to miracles that has surfaced in this examination is his comment regarding philosophical arguments for the existence of God in his *Philosophy of Religion.* In this text, Hick sides with David Hume's position: "They can always either disbelieve the reports, . . . or accept them but give them a naturalistic interpretation."[92] However, at the same period of his development as the preceding statement was written, Hick does acknowledge room for miracles in the life of a religious believer. In fact, a miracle, to be constituted as a miracle, must indeed be part of an awareness of the reality of God. Hick says that

> [t]his theory of faith can also be used to throw light on the nature of the miraculous. For a miracle, whatever else it may be, is an event through which we become vividly and immediately conscious of God as acting towards us. A startling happening, even if it should involve a suspension of natural law, does not constitute for us a miracle in the religious sense of the word if it fails to make us intensely aware of being in God's presence. In order to be miraculous, an event must be experienced as religiously significant. Indeed we may say that a miracle is any event that is experienced as a miracle; and this particular mode of experiencing-as

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[91] Hick, *Rainbow,* 53.

[92] John Hick, "Argument from Special Events and Experiences," in *Philosophy of Religion,* 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 29-30.

is accordingly an essential element in the miraculous.[93]

This is an obvious contradiction with his previous remarks; here, Hick seems to embrace and confirm the possibility of miracles in religious lives, but the importance of this lies in that it was written at the same time as his earliest postulation of the pluralistic hypothesis. And it reinforces what many religious persons would count as miracles. Thus it still remains a mystery as to why he should leave miracles out of the criteria for a religion and discount their importance to the truth claims of religious systems, unless, of course they contradict his later transition to salvation/liberation language, for in this context the non-theistic religions would be unable to attribute miracles in their traditions to God, which, as the foregoing quotation indicates, Hick does require.

While Hick has proposed that the current religious diversity is a deviation from a unitary revelation of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, caused by cultural influences over a period of history, another plausible explanation, one that more closely fits the historical facts, is that religions find their origins more directly in the charismatic figures who first launched them. In the New Testament the Greek term *charisma* refers to "a free gift, gift of God's grace."[94] Thus, charismatic individuals are gifted and, while one might argue that their gifts are divinely originated, one can also certainly argue that they oftentimes have a more personal agenda that finds traction with their followers.[95] Perhaps they are closely allied to Schuon's esoterics, but it seems quite likely that they are individuals with vision and persuasive powers, which enable them to influence those around them. Charismatic religious leaders arise in answer to a particular social or political need, whether or not the case can be made for a transcendent connection.

The rise of Jim Jones, his cult following, and the subsequent mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, is an example of a religious movement that arose to answer a need in the lives of those disenchanted with the political and social influences of their times. This movement was certainly divergent from mainstream Western religions. It started out as a protest movement, and it ended in tragic circumstances that bear little resemblance to what we might expect of a revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, at least not one that most observers would view as promoting the development of high moral and ethical character in its followers.[96] Their actions are characteristics

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[93] Hick, "Religious Faith as Experiencing-as*,"* in *Faiths,* 51.

[94] "χάρισμα*."* *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* 7th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889).

[95] The examples of charismatic individuals that are briefly alluded to here show a wide divergence in how they use or benefit from their influences over their followers. I recognize that, while charismatic individuals have formed many legitimate religions, personal charisma can be used for many other purposes, with some of these being illegitimate or even evil.

[96] A micro perspective on such a group might well view their fanaticism and goals to be of high ethical value, given their rejection of the secular society and their goal of immediate salvation/liberation; however, a macro view would find them at odds with the general trend of beliefs found in their surrounding society.

that Hick would not likely endorse as something worthy of emulation by others.[97] David Koresh and the standoff and untimely deaths of his followers at Waco, Texas, are another example of a charismatic religious leader attracting followers and forming a religious movement that ended in what one clearly would not attribute to the wishes of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality bent on generating individuals worthy of emulating.[98] The various iterations of the Solar Temple movements and other doomsday cults are ongoing examples of divergent religions that have sprung up under individuals claiming some form of divine authority and inspiration. Doomsday religious cults are not necessarily using their claims to divine authority to develop morality and character in their adherents, but are requiring strict obedience and an aversion to the world and its influences, even to the extent of world rejection through violence or self-annihilation.[99]

While the foregoing examples are extreme, there are also examples of charismatic individuals who certainly would fall into Hick's category of claims to divine revelation. Three great religions that come quickly to mind, and that fall within Hick's thesis parameters, are Islam, Christianity, and Theravada Buddhism. All three of these great world religions claim connections to a Transcendent Ultimate Reality and should be subject to its revelation. But are the revelations even remotely the same?

Islam arose during a period of religious diversity among scattered Arabian tribal units amidst a diversity of polytheistic and animistic beliefs. Muhammad claimed direct revelation from God through an angel and received divine instructions (the Qur'ān), which he later dictated for his followers. He converted those most closely related to him and then, through a series of intertribal conflicts, rose to prominence in the region. His religion and its tenets became the prescribed doctrine for the majority of the Arabian peoples. Through ongoing warfare and conquest, Islam became a dominant religion in the region and a force to be reckoned with. It remains one of the most prominent world religions today.

Two questions that arise in the case of Islam are: to what extent is this religion composed of or directed by revelation from a Transcendent Ultimately Reality, and how much of it religious innovation that has arisen from its founder? For instance, the proscription against reducing the Qur'ān to the written word resulted in an oral tradition that diverged into a number of streams over which there is argument today about which is the original and closest form to that which was received by the Prophet. To further add diversity to this religion,

> [t]he words Muhammad spoke and the examples he set became after his death the basis of the faith (īmān) and practice or duty (dīn) of Islam. Many elements were, as far as their final formulation is concerned, the product of later times, for instance the process by which Muhammad's utterances were put into permanent form and distilled into a creed and a way of life did not take place overnight. Divergent groups appealed to Muhammad's remembered talk and conduct; faithfulness to his instruction and example was from the first required. The

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[97] See Charles Selengut, *"Apocalyptic Violence,"* in *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), 95-140 (hereafter cited as *Sacred*). See also Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

differences in interpretation were in no case marked by consciousness of departure from the example set by Muhammad.[100]

In this brief snapshot of the early developments of Islam, we can see that this religion certainly did evolve over time, but we can also see that the personal charisma of the founder has played a substantial role in this development. In fact, one of the tests of the sustainability of a new religion is how well it survives the passing of its founder. In the case of Islam, Muhammad left no instructions about a successor, and this omission played a leading role in the strife and subsequent divergences found within Islam, which continue to this very day. However, Muhammad's pivotal role and place as the founder of Islam remains prominent in its core creed: "There is no god but Allāh, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allāh."[101]

The incorporation of the charismatic into a religion's world view or beliefs, as well as in claims to the transcendent, is certainly exemplified in Islam's accommodation of guidance for its followers: "Allāh reveals his will and guides men in three distinct ways; through Muhammad, his messenger; through the Qur'ān, his revelation; and through the angels."[102] Here we can see the central role of the charismatic leader: he claims to have received the revelation, and his words or sayings are also doctrinal tenets of faith. The ongoing claim to the presence and role of supernatural beings (angels) maintains an aura of connection to the transcendent.[103]

The history of Christianity incorporates some similarities with the formation of Islam. In a time of unrest, under Roman occupation and oppression, and within a religious system (Judaism) dominated by various factions heavily weighted with legalism, Jesus came upon a Jewish society that was long awaiting the culmination of Messianic prophecies. There is little doubt that Jesus was a charismatic individual with claims of divine origins and the ability to effect miraculous cures. His message was a new and simplified interpretation and application of the Law. As a charismatic religious innovator, Jesus attracted a considerable following, and his teachings, as well as his claims to divinity,[104] remain the central tenets of faith for the largest religious system in the world. Jesus founded a new sect of Judaism that outstripped its own roots and went on to eventually incorporate the balance of the world before any of the other great world religions were able to spread beyond their formative boundaries to any great extent. But the point here is that

> [t]he movement led by Jesus and his earliest followers was focused on the renewal of Israel under the key phrase "the reign of God." It was solely focused on ethnic Judeans, primarily in Galilee, and one of the earliest designations for the movement seems to be "the Way" (as in Acts 19:23). Christianity is the world religion that

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[100] David S. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions,* 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1999), 539.

[101] Ibid., 545.

[102] Ibid., 541.

[103] Miracles might be included here.

[104] A point increasingly disputed by biblical scholars and Hick in his later works.

developed in the late first century and early second century, spreading throughout Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Macedonia, Italy, and then the world. It includes the later doctrines of the Trinity, the creeds, the sacraments, and the New Testament canon.[105]

Jesus readily spoke out against the establishment of his day and addressed the needs of the most marginalized in his society: to be recognized, accepted, and loved. It has usually been acknowledged that Jesus knew himself to be one with the Transcendent Ultimate Reality,[106] although Hick and others are now disputing this claim. For Hick, such a realization lies in his use of language as a metaphor. Be that as it may, Christianity was founded by a charismatic individual believed to be the actual Son of God who was later to be defined by a church council as the second person of the Trinity. Whatever revelation, emanating from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, lies behind the formation of Christianity, or its foretelling in the Jewish prophets, it was not until the arrival of Jesus upon the scene in Palestine so long ago that this religious system arose. While certainly not discounting a divine revelation as a precursor of Christianity, its origins clearly lie in the person of Jesus Christ himself (with later developments and claims by church councils) and his ability to sway those who heard and adopted his message. Unlike Muhammad, Jesus did leave behind a successor (Peter and/or Paul) with authority to establish the new faith, but this new faith had growing pains as well.

The third great world religion that typifies a founder with great charisma is Buddhism, which was founded by a prince named Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha). Theravada Buddhism is the earliest form of this religion, and it arose as one of several heterodox religions amidst the previously established Brahmin religion. It was a protest against the formal religion that operated within a caste system. As such, Theravada Buddhism was not elitist and was open to anyone who came to follow the Buddha's teachings on suffering and its elimination. While the Buddha initially led a protected life, he became greatly alarmed after seeing individuals who were sick, aging, and dead. This led him to question life itself, and he set about to find a solution to the difficulties of life. His eventual *awakening* to the true meaning of life and how to attain final liberation was a pivotal event in religious development, but his personal charisma led many to follow his teachings and example.

Thus, we see in the formation of Theravada Buddhism a religion founded primarily upon the teachings of an individual with great persuasive power. While the Buddha may well have been connected in some way to the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, it would seem his religion was based either primarily on his own interpretation of suffering's causes; his personal teachings of the purpose of life; and his lifestyle. However, after the Buddha's passing, leadership issues arose and spawned various philosophical schools of thought concerning how to best carry out his teachings. The end result is the vast array of different forms of Buddhism that have arisen down to modern times with some even worshiping the Buddha, in contradiction to his early instructions to his followers.[107]

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[105] K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 14.

[106] This is a central tenet of the Gospel of John.

[107] See Donald S. Lopez, Jr. ed., *Buddhist Scriptures* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), (hereafter cited as *Scriptures*); and Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (Cambridge:

In the foregoing three examples of the formation of religious movements it would appear that any presence of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality was filtered or mediated through the charismatic individual who was primarily responsible for founding each one of them. Since this is the way that at least three of the great world religions originated, it would seem that their divergences were well underway right from the start and are not later developments; they arose roughly at a common point in history, but they took dramatically different forms and espoused vastly different dogmas, although they initially addressed the issues of their particular cultures and societies. What Hick is correctly noting as the vast differences we find today is something imbedded in these religious forms right from the beginning and presumably close to the period, if any, of revelation from a transcendent original source. But what, then, of their similarities? How do such divergent systems create individuals of good character and moral worth?

Certainly religions, besides offering salvation/liberation, are a normative influence on their societies. While religions can and often do connect their followers with the Transcendent Ultimate Reality in some ways, they also operate within their own cultures. Thus, it would seem to be expected that a religion's tenets would also introduce a moral component that teaches civility and morality to its followers within the cultural context of its originating society. By extension, some religions would expect such behaviour to be extended to members of other religions, but this has not always been the case when overriding claims of exclusive truths are held by a particular religion with the net result that this means the others are somehow defective or lacking and to be avoided. This latter view is the driving force behind Hick's push for pluralism—to let go of truth claims that underlie religious intolerance.

From this brief examination of religious development arises a further criticism of Hick's hypothesis. Given an original and unitary transcendent revelation that forms the core of the great world religions, one would expect to see religious development that is 1) similar in its original form among all the great world religions, and 2) fairly cohesive in the early stages with very slow divergences under cultural influences over the course of time. The latter development is what Hick thinks is the underlying cause between the great divergences noticeable today. But as we have seen, in the first instance, religions develop primarily under the influence of charismatic individuals with vastly different agendas. If they are truly influenced by a transcendent revelation, the revelation seems inherently different in each case, thus causing difficulty for Hick's thesis. If religions are formed primarily under the influence of charismatic religious innovators' agendas, the influence of a transcendent revelation is greatly lessened, again a problem for Hick's thesis. What remains to be seen is whether or not the early stages of religions (the first few generations after the death of the charismatic founder) can be expected to be cohesive.

The three religions that have been identified above all underwent serious struggles over either leadership or dogma in the first years after the death of their leaders. They have also, of course, undergone much revision and maturation in the many centuries since their formations, and, as Hick has rightly noted, these influences were culturally imposed in the areas where the religions expanded and to which they spread.

The important point here is that if a religion was founded upon a divine revelation, its original truth claims should be noticeable and inherent in its formative and earliest developing years. I will

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Cambridge University Press, 1990).

now offer evidence that disputes this theory by drawing upon the early stages of Christianity, mainly because of its popularity and familiarity with many members of our current society. The early history of the Christian religion was a time of turmoil over orthodoxy and the dogmatics that flowed therefrom. For instance, the winners of the so-called *proto-orthodox* struggles of the first three to four centuries after the death of Christ were able to assert their views that Jesus was in fact the Son of God and not, for instance, a *demiurge* responsible merely for the creation of the physical world as some of the *gnostic* Christians claimed. Hick's hypothesis would have us believe that divergences are among religions, but it fails to address those within religions. The historical facts indicate that Christianity could have easily been vastly different from what we know it as today, and it was only by sheer determination that those forces aligned with today's orthodoxy prevailed over those with vastly different ideas about the nature and being of Christ.

The primary source for this examination is Bart Erhman's *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew.* He argues persuasively that there were many divergent forms of Christianity in the several generations following the death of Christ and that many failed to recognize his divinity; gnostic Christianity even doubted that God created the world as we know it. According to Erhman's research into the earliest writings available to scholars of Christianity,

> [t]he outcome of these internecine Christian battles was significant. The group that emerged as victorious and declared itself orthodox determined the shape of Christianity for posterity—determining its internal structure, writing its creeds, and compiling its revered texts into a sacred canon of Scripture. Had things turned out otherwise, not just the Christian Church but all of history would have been quite different. . . .
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> By the second century, of course, there was already a long history of quarrels in the Christian tradition. Jesus himself had enemies, and they tended to be those with whom he had a good deal in common. Chief among his opponents during his public ministry were Pharisees, a group of Jews who insisted on keeping God's Law fully and completely. . . .
>
> When we move the calendar forward twenty years to Jesus' outspoken apostle, Paul, we find a comparable situation, only now the "internal" conflicts involve battles within the Christian community, founded after Jesus' death. Every church that Paul established appeared to have become embroiled in turmoil. His letters were meant to solve the problems. Throughout these letters we find harsh and forthright opposition to false teachers. But it is important to note that these are *Christian* false teachers, who are in *Paul's* churches. Sometimes readers neglect to consider the implication: These "false" teachers understand themselves to be continuing on in the same Christian tradition as Paul, bringing out the implications of the gospel message, providing a fuller account of what Paul had taught while passing through town making converts. Paul, however, sees them as standing over against his gospel message, and so he attacks them with a vehemence unparalleled in his comments about pagans or Jews.[108]

It is important that we not gloss over Erhman's analysis. While it is not a new claim, the conflicts in the early churches are obvious from reading the historical and divergent lists of the canon of the New Testament.[109] What is noteworthy was the potential for the evolution of a vastly different

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[108] Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 159-160.

[109] The *official* list of the New Testament books (those recognized as such today) was not finalized until 367 AD. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

Christianity, an evolution that many early Christians would have supported or even welcomed. Erhman offers a glimpse into what this great world religion could have looked like in the following synopsis:

> Throughout this study I have tried to hypothesize what it may have been like if some other side had "won." If the Marcionite Christians had gained ascendancy, would people still ask, "Do you believe in God?" Or would they ask, "Do you believe in two Gods?" Would anyone except scholars of antiquity have *heard* of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John? Would we have an "Old" Testament? How would the social and political relations of Jews and Christians over the centuries have been affected? Would Christians who rejected the Jewish God and all things Jewish feel a need to polemicize against and attack Jews? Or would they simply ignore Jews as not presenting any real competition to their own claims of the knowledge of the other God, who saved them from the creator? Would anti-Semitism be worse, or would it be nonexistent?
>
> If, on the other hand, Ebionite Christians had gained ascendency, would Christianity have remained a sect within Judaism? Would Christians today worship on Saturdays instead of Sundays? Would they keep kosher? Would these Jewish-Christians have wanted or been able to convert masses of people to their message of salvation, when conversion would have required men to undergo circumcision? Would Christianity have been anything but a footnote in the history of world religions?
>
> We can probably say with some certainty that if some other side had won—Marcionite, Ebionite, some form of Gnostic—there would have been no doctrine of Christ as both fully divine and human. As a consequence, there would have been no doctrine of the Trinity. How would that have affected the intellectual life of the Middle Ages, the development of scholastic modes of argumentation, the modern Christian debates over the relationship between divine revelation (say, of religious mystery) and human reason (which cannot comprehend the depths of mystery)?[110]

The possibility that such a pre-eminent world religion as Christianity may only be the result of human argument, persuasion, or coercion seems to suggest at least three possibilities: 1) if it is founded upon a revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, there should most likely not have been such immediate conflict over the form or truth of its origins and beliefs; or 2) there is a strong likelihood that Christianity was indeed founded upon the charisma of its human instigator, Jesus of Nazareth, with the natural outcome that his successors would attempt to create a working model of a religion based on how they collectively or individually came to understand him and his teachings; or, 3) if the final iteration of Christianity, its orthodoxy, is in fact the true set of beliefs Christians are bound to follow today, there may have been some guidance or control exerted behind the scenes by a Transcendent Ultimate Reality, down through the millennia, leading the Church to its ultimate form. All of these possibilities raise serious doubts about Hick's hypothesis. A revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality should be expected to set a unified groundwork for the establishment of a system of religion; if religions really are of primarily of human origin, Hick's transcendent origin must be called into question; and if religions start in turmoil but end in workable models, Hick's chronology seems backwards at best and simply wrong at worst.

Since the other two great world religions previously discussed had similar historical patterns of development, it would seem that such early divergences in the inceptions of religious movements pose serious difficulties for Hick's hypothesis. It may be that his hypothesis is too simplistic or it attempts to do too much in an effort to come to terms with both the similarities and the differences of the exclusive truth claims we see today.

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[110] Ibid., 247-248.

Notwithstanding the foregoing analysis, the lingering problem for Hick's thesis is that by hinging it upon revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality Hick has marginalized and made impotent all that we would hypothesize about the nature of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality. That is to say, we would expect that any Transcendent Ultimate Reality worth its name should be able to express itself to humanity in a definite way that invokes both clarity and truth in its message. It would make its presence and self known in such a way that we would not doubt them. Certainly, the message might be filtered through an esoteric, or a charismatic leader, or even through cultural and historical influences. But Hick's problem is the rampant diversity evidenced in today's great world religions. Therefore, where is this Transcendent Ultimate Reality today? Why does it not again intervene on the world stage and set the matter straight once and for all? Hick blames the fracturing of the original message on the difficulty of communication between societies in times past. However, in today's global community, communication is almost instantaneous. If the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is aware of and concerned about religious divergence from its original transmission, where is the new revelation of religious truth that Hick is so concerned to promote?

CHAPTER THREE
Epistemology of Faith and Belief

The last chapter exposed a number of shortcomings in Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. I now propose to examine the effects that the adoption of hard religious pluralism would have on religious believers' faith and beliefs. However, before moving on, these terms need clarification. I use the terms 'faith', 'belief', and 'knowledge', as they are grounded in the subjective nature of religion as discussed in this thesis. I shall take belief to mean a firm opinion or conviction that accepts something as a fact that becomes useful for an individual. Faith is the confidence or trust that one has about the veracity of a certain belief, even in the absence of a logical proof. And knowledge is justified true belief. While we can only know true statements, we can certainly have beliefs about a variety of topics, and we believe them to be true as long as we are justified in believing them to be so. That is, until their falsity is proven to us, we are justified in continuing to believe in their veracity.

The first and foremost consideration, when dealing with faith and belief from a religious standpoint, returns to the previously discussed notion that, above all, a religion must serve some purpose in the lives of its practitioners. Hick has offered a definition of religion as a prelude to his pluralistic hypothesis in its early exposition in *Faiths*: religion is "an understanding of the universe, together with an appropriate[111] way of living within it, which involves reference beyond the natural world to God or gods or to the Absolute or to a transcendent order or process."

Let us first notice the vagueness surrounding to whom or what religion relates or refers in this definition. Hick's purpose is, of course, to be all-encompassing or at least to avoid excluding as many forms of religious belief as possible. His definition addresses all that represents the supernatural aspect of the universe as well. Therefore, there is no specific definition that, for Hick, separates the Eastern from the Western schools of religious thought and interpretation. In fact, Hick, in his *magnum opus An Interpretation of Religion*, while attempting "A Religious Interpretation of Religion," becomes even more vague to the point of seemingly abandoning the attempt to define religion at all. In his opening chapter, Hick tries to resolve the problems inherent in creating a definition or concept of religion that could include every foreseeable combination of religious thought and practice. He looks for "a starting point from which to begin to chart this range of [religious] phenomena."[112] In doing so he finds that the vast array of religious forms "cannot be adequately defined but only described." As such, "[i]t becomes a matter instead of noting their positions within a complex, ramified network of related phenomena. Having done this we have resolved—or perhaps dissolved—the problem of the definition of 'religion'."[113] But, not to entirely abandon the attempt, Hick then turns to defining the function of religion which "in each case is to provide the contexts for salvation/liberation, which consists in various forms of human existence from self-centredness to

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[111]   While Hick does not explain his use of "appropriate" in this context, I take his meaning, or purpose, to be something along the line of what one might deem moral attitude or behaviour acted out within one's own societal setting in relation to those around her. Furthermore, a right attitude towards the Transcendent Ultimate Reality or other concept of the supernatural world would also be in order.

[112]   Hick, *Interpretation*, 4.

[113]   Ibid., 5.

Reality-centredness."[114] Thus, he continues to emphasize the role of religion as primarily character-building,[115] and he focuses his attention on how this is achieved within the various traditions.

Returning to the analysis of Hick's original definition, the next point of note refers to the "appropriate way of living" requirement or result of religious belief. Hick, following the Kantian tradition, is mostly concerned with the development of moral character and sees this as the primary function of religion (with the ultimate goal of salvation/liberation). Therefore, let us notice that whatever else can be said about the effects of religion it must operate beyond the individual, finding its source outside the natural world and emanating from something that transcends human abilities and understanding. Thus, for Hick, religion primarily directs us to a growing understanding of the universe, while building our moral characters in the process.

But is this really what religion is all about? Certainly Hick acknowledges the possibility of "God, gods, or . . . the Absolute." He has often, in his earlier works, described himself as a theist. He takes pains to suggest that the religious will grow in understanding of things beyond what presumably the non-religious individual might, while growing in the ability to live appropriately in the world around him or her. However, we might question this assumption simply by noting the high moral characters of the lives of many non-believers in a transcendent order, or those who believe the divine is within them, or even those who discount the possibility of anything outside of what they can experience in their daily lives.[116] But is this all there is to religion? Are religious believers of a specific creed called to let go of their particular truth claims, or the assumed superiority of their beliefs over those of others, merely to get along more harmoniously and build their good characters?

I strongly suspect that there is much more to religion than Hick would have us believe and that the answers to these questions lie in a more developed definition that includes the purpose of religion. As a preliminary attempt to formulate a definition of a religion that works in some substantial way, the following commentary from Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge is an example of the complexity of the quest:

> How can we distinguish between religions and other ideological systems? In our judgement, the answer was correctly given by the 19th century founders of the social scientific study of religion, those men whose

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[114] Ibid., 14.

[115] I use this term to generally refer to Hick's emphasis throughout his works that an important aspect, especially noticeable in his definition, of any religion is its ability to mold or influence the character of its followers. For example, reflecting on how his new experiences in inter-faith action and dialogue in Birmingham prompted his turn towards pluralism, Hick states: "Encounters with remarkable individuals of several faiths, people whom I cannot but deeply respect, and in some cases even regard as saints, have reinforced the realisation that our very different religious traditions constitute alternative human contexts of response to the one ultimate transcendent divine Reality." John Hick, "Religious Pluralism: A Personal Note," in *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993), 141. Sinkinson also notes the importance of character-building in Hick's philosophy. He incorporates the above quotation within the observations that "Hick worked alongside those of other faiths and in doing so was challenged by the quality of life and spirituality that they embodied. . . . Hick had already come to believe in universalism and had felt that adherents of other religions exemplified qualities sometimes missing among fellow Christians." Sinkinson, *Critical Study*, 9.

[116] See footnote 28.

position Durkheim attempted to bury: *religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, or force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural.* Or, as Sir James G. Frazer (1922:58) puts it, "religion consists of two elements . . . a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them."[117]

The common point in the preceding definitions, including Hick's, is the reality of the supernatural.[118] Of course, the mere fact that religion does address the supernatural is helpful for Hick because, by its very nature, the supernatural cannot be proven to exist or not to exist. Thus his dismissal of language that tends to favour theism over non-theism depends on the inability to prove the validity or non-validity of either position. There is no need to hold to exclusive truth claims that cannot be definitively proven.[119]

But what is it that, in the first place, drives religious humans to need to address the supernatural, especially in a formalized way? Why would we need to propitiate the supernatural, assuming that we could do so?[120] Here we must incorporate something of human nature, a human nature that, while certainly wanting to develop awareness of what lies beyond the natural world and to develop a greater moral character, wants something more, something of an extrinsic nature. That is, while believers may find it mandated that they perform specific acts required as a duty or command imposed by the god(s), they also do these because they seek particular favours that only the god(s) can provide, and a propitiated god might look more favourably upon their requests. Stark and Bainbridge have determined this to be found in an analysis of basic human behaviour: "*Humans seek*

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[117] Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 5 (hereafter cited as *Future*); see also Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

[118] I take it to be the case that the use of "supernatural" can be inclusive of both theistic and non-theistic religions. Otherwise, a certain refinement of the wording must be made in order to incorporate non-theistic religions.

[119] As I note throughout this thesis, Hick does argue that the concept of the existence of God can be verified (his eschatological verification hypothesis). For a rebuttal of this position see: Terry Matthis, *Against John Hick: An Examination of His Philosophy of Religion* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1985). For Hick's revision of his eschatological verification hypothesis see: John Hick, "Eschatological Verification Reconsidered," *Religious Studies* 13, no. 2 (1977).

[120] If we take propitiate to imply a burden placed on us by the god(s) to offer tribute, sacrifice, or obsequious postures and attitudes out of duty or fear, we necessarily limit the possibilities of what religion can accomplish in the lives of individuals. For instance Hume's character, Demea, takes this negative view: "we incessantly look forward, and endeavour, by prayers, adoration, and sacrifice to appease [propitiate] those unknown powers, whom we find, by experience, so able to afflict and oppress us. . . . What resource for us amidst the innumerable ills of life, did not religion suggest some methods of atonement, and appease those terrors, with which we are incessantly agitated and tormented." Daved Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779; repr., Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 61 (hereafter cited as *Dialogues*). However, if a believer ardently hopes for an improvement in her temporal situation, or the accomplishment of an eternal salvation/liberation, having the right attitude towards the god(s) and offering the right words and offerings, in concert with a belief in the efficacy of both her actions and the god(s)'s ability to intervene in her affairs, she will attempt to influence or manipulate the god(s) to accede to her own wishes (a positive view). Of course these wishes will be coherent within her own belief system or structure.

what they perceive to be rewards and try to avoid what they perceive to be costs."[121] These findings can readily be applied to many aspects of human behaviour and we should expect to find no exceptions in the sphere of religion.

To condense Stark and Bainbridge's research in this area, human lives are acted out on this temporal plane amongst a variety of conditions, opportunities, setbacks, and even hardships. Hick has addressed and acknowledged these aspects of the human condition using his interpretation of the "Irenaean Theodicy" in which he attempts to explain the presence of evil in this world.[122] God uses evil as a means of teaching and building character in individuals. Of course, David Hume uses the presence of evil to raise doubt about the existence of God—there is simply too much evil in the world for a so-called loving God to use it for a positive purpose.[123] Either way, the problem of evil highlights a concern that most individuals (including the non-religious) have: why does life impart hardships or suffering on so many people? While there are no pat answers to these questions, the fact remains that many people find this life very difficult.[124]

Stark and Bainbridge have offered a practical solution to the problem by suggesting that "we can recognize another characteristic human action: the creation and exchange of *compensators.*"[125] The importance of this observation, from the practical standpoint of defining religion and examining Hick's thesis, is that what they describe as "rewards" are scarce in the lives of many people at best, and missing or unevenly distributed at worst.[126] Some people are very well off, while others suffer extreme hardships in this life. We might wait our whole lives to attain even the basic necessities, without ever realizing them, and others might live lavish lifestyles without ever earning or deserving

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[121]   Stark and Bainbridge, *Future*, 5. For instance, applying this premise to the religious experience, there are no doubt some who would hope for, perhaps even demand, the eschatological promises made by their own religions, but may fail to adhere closely to the dogmatic requirements necessary to attain these.

[122]   John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 253-261.

[123]   Hume, *Dialogues,* Part 10.

[124]   Since I wish to avoid the charge of seeming to be pan-Christian, we must note that non-theistic religions face the same challenges in the lives of their adherents, and, while having quite different approaches to the problem, they also look for something positive after this existence. The doctrines of karma and reincarnation are some of the *equivalents* to the solution offered by the concept of salvation.

[125]   Stark and Bainbridge, *Future,* p. 6.

[126]   Here the term "rewards" includes more than compensation for being poor or deprived, as well as for being diseased or subject to life's unfairness. It also refers to other more tangible human desires: "religious organizations provide more than compensators. Any organization that provides a stage for human action and interaction will provide numerous direct rewards. . . . religious organizations deal not only in compensators, in intangibles, but also in very tangible, direct rewards. Thus, people can gain a variety of rewards from religious commitment. They can earn a living from religion. Religions offer human companionship, status as an upright person of good character (Weber, 1946: 303-305), leisure and recreational activity, opportunities for marriage, courtship, and business contacts—a whole host of things people value." Ibid., 11; see also Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

them. Therefore, it seems reasonable that those who are shortchanged in the extrinsic rewards of this lifetime might rightfully expect some form of compensation (through the promises elicited from their religions' supernatural ties), but not a compensation to be realized in this lifetime—a compensation in a future lifetime: "Some intensely desired rewards seem not to be available at all. For example, no one can demonstrate whether there is life after death,[127] but everyone can see that immortality cannot be gained in the here and now, in the natural world available to our senses. But the simple unavailability of the reward of eternal life has not caused people to cease wanting it. To the contrary, it is probably the single most urgent human desire."[128] That being the case, they note that "[p]eople may experience rewards, but they can only have faith in compensators. *A compensator is the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some context which cannot be immediately verified.*"[129] Thus we develop systems of belief (religions) in which we try to evolve and live in moral ways, address the god(s) with reverence, request divine graces and benefits, and seek some form of meaning about that which lies beyond death—either as (a) compensation for perceived inadequacies in this life or as (b) an ultimate purpose for existence: salvation or liberation.[130] That is to say, religions generally encourage believers to endure the vicissitudes of their temporal lives, to keep their faiths intact, because this life is not the one that counts for them; they must endure life's difficulties for a short time to attain eternal life or liberation, as the case may be.

From this observation, we can now determine the reason for the foregoing comment about the need to "propitiate or please" the gods. This is because anything having to do with the afterlife, or the cessation of endless lives, lies in the supernatural realm. It has reference beyond Hick's natural world. Those of an apocalyptic bent have, of course, a most pressing need to formulate a right relationship with the divine: if entry into the much anticipated and forthcoming next age or life is dependent upon actions in this world or life, individuals must repent, turn from their evil ways, and come to believe in the power of the Divine to judge their actions favourably. Thus, worldliness and earthly rewards are to be eschewed in favour of otherworldly goals (salvation/liberation). And religious teachings and systems help to support individuals in this quest. In addition, if sin is believed to be the underlying cause for suffering (striving or grasping in Theravada Buddhism), then we call upon our systems of religion to identify its cause and mediate its effects. Rather than postulating that the purpose of religion is primarily to develop character in individuals, we see that what individuals really want are compensators for what they endure, or give up, in this life. Certainly, religions, above

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[127] Hick does, however, as mentioned above, take it that the existence of God can be verified after death "if the logically prior idea of continued personal existence after death is intelligible." John Hick, "Faith and Verification," in *Faith and Knowledge,* 2nd ed. with new preface (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 179 (hereafter cited as *Faith*).

[128] Stark and Bainbridge, *Future*, 6.

[129] Ibid.

[130] I believe this theory can be adapted to address the non-theistic religions. In the case of non-theistic religions, those that adhere to the doctrine of karma, for instance, the effects of *dukha*, or suffering, can be alleviated and offset by coming to an understanding of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and then following the Eight-fold Path to enlightenment. These are the steps to liberation or *nirvana.* See Lopez, *Scriptures.*

all else, require good character, or adherence to rules regarding moral behaviour, by their followers; the purpose of these requirements is to ensure the reception of "supernatural compensators" which lie in the realm of the transcendent to provide.[131] Thus the need to worship, offer sacrifices, or to come to a union with the Divine or Absolute. Religions provide a framework in which their believers work out this process.[132]

The possibility of obtaining the aforementioned supernatural compensators may remain open for discussion, but many who profess to belong to a religion already accept the possibility and fervently hope for it. That is to say, they believe in the efficacy of their religion to accomplish their goals, and, to the degree that their religion can produce such confidence, they believe what its dogmas require them to practice in order to achieve these ends. In some ways this hope plays into Hick's Eschatological Verification hypothesis that the existence of God will be verified after the death of the individual who receives eternal life. For Hick, the existence of God can be verified, but not just now—we have to die first to know for sure.[133] That being the case, what we do now and how we live will impact the future beyond this temporal existence. Therefore, a practical definition of religion can be stated as follows: religions are "*human organizations primarily engaged in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions.*"[134]

The divergence in these definitions of religion points to the fundamental difference between Hick's epistemology and the workaday function of religion. Hick would have religion primarily build character, whereas it seems to be closer to the case that religion serves to get us through the day in a right relationship with the Transcendent Ultimate Reality and positions us towards the future with it. Certainly, building character is necessary if we believe that only those of good, or well developed, character will attain salvation/liberation, which is the primary goal of Hick's theology. But do we not also turn to religion to address the god(s)'s ability to reward and protect those who persevere and develop their characters in the face of adversity or disadvantage? We need the rains to water the

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[131] This is not meant to propose a doctrine of salvation through works, but to reinforce what Hick himself has noted about religious individuals. That is, through faith in the underlying Transcendent Ultimate Reality and obedience to its teachings through the dogmas of their religious systems, these persons will display a corresponding moral character that emerges from such adherence. Otherwise a dissonance might be expected to develop. The point here is that, while the initial motivation might be something along the line of a "heavenly reward" or liberation, religious individuals, those who develop and display moral character, will be prepared for and aligned with the potential to inherit salvation/liberation, in part because they come to believe that living a moral life is simply the right thing to do.

[132] We must also remember that certain acts of prayer or devotion are also meant to influence the divine in this present lifetime in order to attain rewards now, but if such requests are not immediately attained, the fallback position can certainly be an expectation of future compensators or rewards.

[133] Once again, we can insert the non-theistic hopes in this formula. Hick, in his later rendition of this hypothesis, has abandoned its theistic limitations and included the possibility of knowing salvation/liberation after the death of the believer in an ongoing series of existences. What is important in any analysis of Hick is to notice that his original formulation of the eschatological verification thesis was directed at salvation, and he later expanded it to incorporate salvation/liberation.

[134] Stark and Bainbridge, *Future,* 8.

crops, good weather for harvests, protection from the elements, and security for our families against enemies in the here and now. These are extrinsic rewards that help alleviate the cares of temporal life and ensure its continuation. While somewhat related, these two concepts have quite different outcomes for the hard religious pluralist and the hard religious exclusivist.

In the case of the hard religious pluralist, the view that all or most religions build character is quite acceptable, but not very satisfying. If it is the case that dogmatic truths must be abandoned in order to achieve hard religious pluralism in the first instance, we may wonder what is left that will do the heavy lifting of such character-building and moral development. That is to say, if we are not challenged to work through claims made of the supernatural's ability to produce rewards and build character, if we accept that being good, or not being bad, is enough, why would we wish to hold on to any vestiges of our former religion and its uniqueness? Why not simply institute a one-world religion and remove any differences at all? Hick has never advocated this position. He has always claimed to be a Christian theist.[135]

On the other hand, the hard religious exclusivist will hold on to her faith in the ability of the supernatural to provide her the compensators which she seeks, whether or not she deserves or has earned them.[136] She makes no assumptions that simply building character is what she wants out of life. She has faith that she will be compensated in the afterlife at the least, and, at best, rewarded for her religious faith in this lifetime as well. She does this through a belief in the veracity of the system of religion to which she belongs, its teachings and demands upon her, and her belief that other fellow believers, going before her, have received their similar desires through their adherence to their religion's claims to influence the divine.

In both the pluralist and the exclusivist systems, there remain claims that the Transcendent Ultimate Reality is experienced in some way. We cannot deny the possibility of the presence of the Transcendent, even though Hick stresses the religious ambiguity of the universe. But, for those who see the universe through religious eyes, it is their systems of religion that enable them to approach the Transcendent Ultimate Reality in meaningful ways. In religious systems we are called to have faith that it is possible to somehow tap into the Transcendent and come to terms with its demands upon us. Since Hick has noted how faith is rationally constructed according to cultural influences, I will now examine briefly an opposing position that requires a religious structure in order to actually lead an individual to choose to have faith in the unseen.

To do so, I turn to a Thomistic answer to the question of how we can indeed have faith in something that transcends what can in fact be seen in the daily lives of believers. In considering the matter of faith, Thomas Aquinas writes,

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[135] We might think that Hick is calling for an abandonment of religion as such and the institution of some form of a social contract, perhaps a global social contract, which compels us to live in peace, harmony, and mutual respect with all others. This is not something that Hick endorses, since to do so would presumably neglect the soteriological aspect of religions, the overarching goal of religious believers.

[136] She may also hold fast to her conviction as to the veracity of her beliefs about the supernatural element of her religion, for to do otherwise could call into question her own rational beliefs about God's nature and abilities. Somehow failing to obtain her goals might even be more acceptable than casting any doubt upon the Deity's ability to provide them for her because, in doing so her religious world view, so important in her daily existence, would cease to have meaning and relevance for her.

Faith denotes an assent of the understanding to what is believed. The understanding assents to something in two ways. In one way, because it is moved by this object itself. The object is either known through itself, as is clear in first principles, of which one has understanding; or it is known through another, as is clear in conclusions, of which one has knowledge. In a second way, the understanding assents to something, not because it is sufficiently moved by the proper object, but by a choice of the will tending to one alternative rather than another. And if this occurs with doubt and hesitation about the other alternative, there is opinion. If it occurs with certainty and without any such hesitation, there is faith. Things are said to be seen that by themselves move our intellect or sense to their apprehension. And so it is manifest that neither faith nor opinion can be things seen either by sense or by intellect.[137]

What this means to one's faith in a Transcendent Ultimate Reality in her life is that, the Transcendent Ultimate Reality cannot be known directly at all, even to Schuon's esoteric types, according to Aquinas. Therefore, she needs to have some source of knowledge that it does so exist; she must have some system that enables her to do so, and this is the second way for Aquinas. He proclaims that faith is the understanding's assent to propositions taught by the Church's claims to divine revelation. Therefore, she does not, as Hick would have it, make a cognitive choice about believing in the existence of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality through her personal experiences of the world around her, but such experiences confirm or challenge her choice to accept what the Church tells her is the truth about God, and her faith in the veracity of such claims eliminates all doubt in the matter for her. Without a definitive personal experience or exposition of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality to each and every individual, she must rely on those who have pioneered the way for her, perhaps those esoterics or charismatic religious innovators who formulated her belief system based on their own claims of access to the divine. She needs the saints and the stories and teachings of her religious structure and belief system. She needs the demands her religion imposes upon her to develop her character, and she needs to believe that it can help her connect to the supernatural and tap into the rewards which are promised to her. When she comes to accept the beliefs of her system of religion, she can grow her faith in both their veracity and their efficacy.[138] She will relate the natural world to her faith in the Transcendent, and she will come to see the Transcendent in her daily life.

Hick is well aware of Aquinas' view of faith in the unseen, quoted above, and offers his own analysis of it in *Interpretation.* However, Hick also goes on to say that

> [f]or Aquinas, then, faith expresses the individual's innermost choice of openness to the divine presence; and he located this decision on the level of intellectual belief. I have suggested instead that this fundamental option occurs at the deeper level of the *cognitive choice* [emphasis added] whereby we come to experience in

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[137] Thomas Aquinas, "Of Faith," *Summa Theologiae,* 2-2. q. 1. art. 4, in *On Faith*, trans., with an Introduction and Notes, by Mark D. Jordan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 39-40.

[138] For instance, a belief in the attributes of the Divine is taught through dogmatic formulations, and it is perhaps experienced to some degree in liturgical practices, prayers, and group worship and praise. However, the believer who has an inherent faith in the ability of the Divine to answer prayer requests must surely grow in his confidence of this belief once he actually experiences an answer to such prayer. That is, one can have a belief that God is love and cares for his followers, but when a prayer for healing from a specific malady is answered, the believer is most likely to have an increased expectation, or faith, that future prayers will also be answered, or *vice versa*.

either a religious or a non-religious way. For the world as humanly inhabited is perceived in distinctive ways by the religiously illumined mind. This can happen because our individual and communal modes of experience include a variable element, an uncompelled interpretive activity, which I am identifying as faith.[139]

Here we can see that Hick is returning to his idea that the universe is religiously "ambiguous."[140] That is, there is nothing compelling us to wear religious lenses when we attempt to make sense of, or cognitive choices about, the world around us. In his introduction to *Interpretation* he says, "[t]he universe is religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially, both religiously and naturalistically. The theistic and anti-theistic arguments are all inconclusive, for the special evidences to which they appeal are also capable of being understood in terms of the contrary world view. Further, the opposing sets of evidences cannot be given objectively quantifiable values."[141] Some people are motivated to see the world in religious terms, for instance to see a design and designer behind everything in nature, while others ignore such a possibility and accept evolutionary processes as the force behind such diversity. But the religiously inclined, those who believe in an unseen designer, must do so from a position of faith in the ability of such a force to create all that is seen and experienced. However, this faith is, for Hick, the result of experience, and this experience is a determinant of how the individual views the world: religiously or non-religiously. It would seem, then, that Hick requires each individual first to have a culturally influenced world view that incorporates the existence of a Transcendent Ultimate Reality and then make a cognitive choice, based on her own personal experience of the world, about what she chooses to believe about its existence and influence upon her.[142] Furthermore, Hick bases his argument for

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[139] Hick, *Interpretation,* 159.

[140] Herein lies the differences in their positions. Hick argues that the existence of the Divine or Transcendent Ultimate Reality is at least possible and our individual experience of the world around us will confirm such an existence once we make the cognitive choice to believe in it. Aquinas, on the other hand, takes the proposition that the existence of God is not self-evident, but we can have faith in God's existence through our belief in the veracity of the Church's teachings.

[141] Hick, *Interpretation*, 12.

[142] While this might seem counter intuitive, especially since it is anti-Thomistic, the following interpretation of Hick, by Carolina Weening, shows how Hick builds upon his Kantian foundation that the Real cannot be perceived directly; we can, at best, only hope to interpret it through cultural constructs, thus we make a cognitive choice about what we believe:

> Hick's claim, as we have seen, is that concepts are precedent to experience. What this means is that experiences become *religious* experiences by means of the application of *religious concepts.* This would seem to imply then that furthermore our concepts are not "inspired" or "God-given", so to speak, but homemade. Yet one might well ask, Must not there be something 'out there' which moves me to employ *religious* concepts instead of, let us say, physical or psychological ones? Hick of course believes in the Real, but in matters of perception and interpretation his point is that the *"hook"* which calls forth the interpretation *is not in the data but in the reader of the data.* The world is ambiguous, and one can interpret it religiously or naturalistically. This means that there is no religious data as such, but rather *data which is interpreted religiously.*

Weening, *Whose Truth?* 112.

cognitive choice on how one makes rational decisions about her environment and experiences, but he also notes a possible difficulty for his hypothesis:

> Both the religious and the naturalistic ways of construing the world arise from a fundamental *cognitive choice* [emphasis added], which I call faith, which is continuous with the interpretive element within our experience of the physical and ethical character of our environment. . . . the rival worldviews are subject to eventual experiential confirmation or disconfirmation.
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> Confronted with this choice it is rationally appropriate for those who experience their life in relation to the transcendent to trust their own experience, together with that of the stream of religious life in which they participate and of the great figures who are its primary experiential witnesses, and to proceed to believe and to live on that basis.
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> The argument that . . . it is rational to believe what our experience leads us to believe opens up the problem of religious plurality.[143]

The problem, of course, becomes one that the pluralistic hypothesis was originally intended to address. That is, Hick allows that we can make a "cognitive choice" about how we understand the world, and when that choice is religious we will construct our religious beliefs from them. This construction is also tempered by our culturally inherited concepts of religion. But the end result is that Hick's reliance upon the Kantian notion that the Real is unknowable in itself requires us to construct our own beliefs, and such beliefs are bound to be in tension with those legitimately constructed by others. This is so because he calls for us to give "parity" to other religions based upon their observable fruits of salvation/liberation and their character-building evidence. Thus, Hick must rely upon his extension of the axial age theory in an attempt to find a common source that underpins the differing constructions—something he has yet to accomplish. This move is also fraught with difficulties for the axial age theory because Hick is now indicating that it is we individuals who construct what we choose to believe. Therefore, the source of beliefs may not necessarily be something inherited, something once unitary, but that has diverged culturally and historically. We, according to Hick's position, are each faced with the challenge to understand the world through our personal experiences of it and to apply such experiences as we will in order to construct our individual and personal religious world views.

It seems that Aquinas, on the one hand, requires a religious system (the Church) upon which one bases one's faith in the existence of God.[144] But Hick, on the other hand, would have the individual, living in the phenomenal world, and under the influence of her culture (religion), somehow make a "cognitive" choice to accept that there is a noumenal presence behind the phenomenal world she experiences. She will then see the "religiously ambiguous" world through her new religious eyes. This is a demand that might well be undertaken by the esoterics among us, those who need no prodding from the systems of religion constructed by others, but the balance of us, those who remain unconvinced they have been personally touched by the Transcendent, will remain fixed in the physical world of sensory experiences and the cognitions which develop from them: we need and depend upon the beliefs couched within our religious systems to point us to the possibility of the

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[143] Hick, *Interpretation,* 13.

[144] I am greatly indebted to Dr. Carl Still for clarifying Aquinas' views on faith.

Transcendent Ultimate Reality present behind the scenes in order for our faith in God to grow to a deeper awareness and appreciation.

Whether or not beliefs precede faith, beliefs should be based on what one holds to be true. Hick calls for a Copernican revolution in religious theories in order to advance from what he holds to be the Ptolemaic error of our long established religious belief structures. As I understand his original position, the seemingly mutually exclusive truth claims that he finds problematic are, for him, mere divergences from a central kernel of truth divulged to our ancestors. That being the case, one would hope they got it right from the start and that the Ptolemaic error was the inevitable result of the effects of culture and history upon the original truth; otherwise the Ptolemaic error should have arisen from an immediate misinterpretation of the truth when it was originally revealed—something that Hick does not propose. But Hick fails to make room for the fact that the actual Ptolemaic error that placed the earth at the centre of the universe was based on ongoing human observations of the natural world. Those observations were not invented; they actually did exist—they were true. The Ptolemaic problem arose from an incorrect rational interpretation or calculation of those observations. Contrary to Hick's argument, this means that errors in religious claims could have been present right at the start. What started out as religious error could have been the basis for religious thought right from the beginning, and the subsequent evolution of systems of religious belief are but feeble attempts to correct something inherently wrong.[145] They may be closer to the original truth than Hick realizes. The problem, of course, is trying to sort out which one has it right or is actually closer to the truth. While Hick is willing to accept that truth is subjective and subject to change or revision, he also holds that religious truth is indeed verifiable, hence his eschatological verification thesis.

But is this last concern really a concern at all? It is for Hick because the basis for his call to embrace hard religious pluralism is his focus on the negative effects of exclusive religious truth claims. His transition from a Christ-centred theology to a God-centred theology is one of his early attempts to smooth out the impacts of the dramatic extremes of religious beliefs. Stripping Christianity, for instance, of its central notions of the incarnation or the divinity of Christ (by using such claims only as myths or metaphors), allows God alone to hold centre-stage on the theistic world view of beliefs, assuming that all those who believe in "God" believe in the same God. While this might seem problematic for inclusiveness with other non-theistic or polytheistic religions, shifting the language about God to include the "Absolute or . . . a transcendent order or process" or the "Real" completes the movement and simply allows current religious practices to be subsumed under the guise of hard religious pluralism.

Hick says that he does not reject Christianity. He maintains his claim to be a Christian theologian, but one wonders how far he is prepared to revise orthodox Christianity in the name of pluralism. He has already called for the removal of incarnation language, but is he prepared to scrap the balance of what the Christian religion holds dear? Hick finds a rationale for abandoning a formal version of Christianity in the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach. Of Feuerbach Hick says:

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[145] For instance, the possibility of the existence of a knowable Transcendent Ultimate Reality necessitates giving it attributes which can never be adequately conceptualized. Thus the necessity for coming to terms with this through culturally biased formulations that are often mutually exclusive but nevertheless are ongoing attempts at addressing this void in understanding of the universe itself.

He was strongly critical of Christianity and the other religions as they have developed in history. For in these traditions love, the supreme value, is checked by faith—by which Feuerbach means . . . theological belief. Whereas love is universal, making no distinction between person and person, faith as the belief-system of a particular group is divisive, creating hostility between believers and unbelievers. It is thus 'essentially illiberal . . . Dogmatic, exclusive, scrupulous particularity [*sic*], lies in the nature of faith' (Feuerbach [1841] 1957, 251). Faith then, he says, 'is the opposite of love' (257). Whereas true religion symbolizes the unity of the human race by the image of the universal love of God, faith sets up particular human theories which in practice restrict love within a circle of fellow believers. And so Feuerbach concludes, 'In the contradiction between Faith and Love which has just been exhibited, we see the practical, palpable ground of necessity that we should raise ourselves above Christianity, above the peculiar stand-point of all religion' (270).[146]

Hick, accepting Feuerbach here, has now conflated faith with religious dogma or systems instead of faith in the loving God to whom he claims to subscribe. But Feuerbach, and seemingly Hick, are not able to posit a proper human/divine relationship within a religious structure. Hick's analysis of Feuerbach's call for abandoning religious systems is that organized religions' "talk about a transcendent divine reality is false [and] also that such talk leads away from the celebration of human life and that mutual love of all human beings which are alone 'true religion'."[147] He calls this vision of Feuerbach "noble" and notes that "true religion can only be lived out in the relations between the different members of the human species as, in religious terms, different aspects of God."[148] This certainly seems to indicate that Hick has no qualms about placing the hard religious pluralist position well in advance of formal religious structures, and he sees the former leading to "love," while the latter leads away from it or destroys it altogether.

Returning now to the question of belief, I turn to William James' account of how one makes decisions about what to believe. This bears on the overall discussion of religious pluralism because Hick has taken the position that established systems of religious belief have clearly preceded the rise of religious pluralism. His is a call to abandon or modify the established systems in favour of his hard pluralistic views. Therefore, the hard religious exclusivist is called by Hick to abandon her position—that only her religion alone will guide her to the compensators she so fervently desires—in favour of a hard religious pluralist view of religion, which places love above all else. James has surveyed the ground of how beliefs come to pass and reduces many of them to something quite voluntary. He says, "[L]et us call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*. Options may be of several kinds. They may be—1, *living* or *dead;* 2, *forced* or *avoidable;* 3, *momentous* or *trivial;* and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind."[149]

We can apply James' criteria to two cases in which individuals are called upon to embrace the hard religious pluralism viewpoint. The first is the religious person who is functioning well within

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[146] Hick, *Interpretation,* 192.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid., 193.

[149] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy: Human Immortality* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 3.

her chosen religious structure: she has well-founded beliefs based on the teachings and experiences of those who have gone before her; she has faith that by following the tenets of her religion she will come to an awareness of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality and be rewarded for her efforts; and her experiences of the phenomenal world confirm and reinforce her religious beliefs. As a hard religious exclusivist, she cannot accept the possibility of any truth or efficacy in what hard religious pluralism demands of her. Now consider a second individual who is either religiously neutral, having no firm religious beliefs, or skeptical about religious structures and their ability to enhance his life. He may even be disillusioned about religious systems because of their mutually exclusive claims to embody truth about the Transcendent Ultimate Reality.

Looking at James' first criterion, the live option, it would seem that the hard religious exclusivist may not be able to embrace hard religious pluralism since, for her, it is not a live option. For James, "[a] live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed."[150] However, a soft religious exclusivist might embrace a soft religious pluralism and come to a belief that it too offers something of value to those who embrace this hypothesis. The non-exclusivist (and possibly the skeptic) would, however, likely view a call to hard religious pluralism as a live option—it is something in which he could come to believe since he has either no contrary beliefs at all, or he does not hold them very strongly.

With respect to the second criterion, the distinction between forced and avoidable, the hard religious exclusivist would indeed be in a forced situation, but this is certainly not a "live option" for her. She cannot make a conscious decision between the two systems, for they are mutually exclusive for her. The individual without firmly held religious beliefs (or at least without exclusivist views) would not be in such a dire situation, for he could continue in his own agnosticism or skepticism or be open to a variety of other options. Thus, he is not in a forced position.

The final criterion, the momentous or the trivial, would again impact greatly upon the hard religious exclusivist if for no other reason than the consequences it might have on her ability to return to her previous belief system. As James explains: "the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later proves unwise."[151] The hard religious exclusivist would have to gamble that leaving her previous religious system to embrace hard religious pluralism is the right choice, something she cannot do. She may not be able to return if such a move is deemed to be a betrayal by her religion's officials. Thus, such a change in belief would be momentous. For the skeptic or the non-exclusivist the decision is very reversible and thus not momentous; it is trivial.[152]

In sum, Hicks' call to embrace hard religious pluralism is unlikely to be accepted by a hard

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[150] Ibid., 2.

[151] Ibid., 4.

[152] As an example of these two criteria, we can look to Hutterite defections. A young Hutterite man who chooses to leave a colony and experience the outside world may be readmitted to the colony if he becomes disillusioned with what he experiences; thus the decision is trivial, since he can go back. But a family which leaves the colony cannot be accepted back because it took away the children, which are viewed as properly belonging to the colony. Its departure would be a momentous decision. See Karl Peter, et al., "The Dynamics of Religious Defection among Hutterites," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* vol. 21, no. 4 (1982): 327-337.

religious exclusivist because it is not a live option, even though it is forced and momentous indeed. But the non-exclusivist is faced with a different scenario: he is certainly presented with a live option, but it is not forced and it is trivial since there is no immediacy required, and the decision is easily reversible. There is, therefore, no compelling need for either position to adopt Hick's hard religious pluralism. It would seem, then, that using James' criteria, the move to a Hickean adoption of hard religious pluralism would require something of an abandonment of the hard religious exclusivist's long held religious beliefs and a desire to replace them with a new system (or a complete revision of the former system, which would not cause any dissonance by the additional acceptance of hard religious pluralism within the individual's overall world view).

The difficulty facing individuals who might be asked to change their own long held beliefs, or to embrace a particular belief that is new or strange to them, certainly poses a problem for Hick in the case of the hard religious exclusivist who has already developed a solid belief system. She is most unlikely to abandon what she already holds true to embrace a new system of belief for which she has no established foundation, one which may not address her need for supernatural compensators. The skeptic may well fall into the same camp, unless of course, the pluralists can persuade him satisfactorily. Once again, the individual with few tenaciously held religious beliefs may find it easier to embrace hard religious pluralism if he is convinced that character-building is the prime goal of holding a religious conviction.

To further aggravate the problem of convincing the hard religious exclusivist to change her beliefs is the problem that Basil Mitchell has labeled "The Layman's Problem." This problem arises from the observable fact that lay persons are often persuaded that they cannot come to a certain knowledge or belief without guidance from the experts in the field. Of course, the hard religious exclusivist has already been subject to such expert guidance in the form of the dogmatic requirements of her particular system of belief and its spokespersons. Her faith holds her to the correctness of such dogmas. In turn, this belief structure underpins her faith that if she holds true to particular teachings and claims she will ultimately be rewarded. However, suppose she begins to question her beliefs or be influenced by a barrage of new ideas. Should she immediately adopt them? Certainly the individual with no firmly held beliefs might be inclined to do so. But the problem for the exclusivist arises in the multitude of experts (Hick included) who offer a plethora of alternatives which seem to be at odds with one another. What is she to do? According to Mitchell, "nothing" is the best alternative:

> 1. In situations of difficulty there is often much to be said for doing nothing, and this is the first option I propose to explore. Doing nothing does not mean, in this context, trying to have no opinions, since this is manifestly impossible. We all find ourselves, at any given time, with a large body of opinions, upon which we rely and which, we trust, are reasonably coherent. The policy I have in mind is that of continuing to believe whatever one happens to believe now. Let us call it 'methodological conservatism'. As a policy it has certain evident advantages:
> (a) We each of us know what we think; we are familiar with it and we are at home with it.
> (b) It has got each of us where we are without manifest disaster. To that extent experience favours it; and it is moreover, our own experience. We have, to a greater or lesser degree, been 'nourished' by the convictions we have already got.[153]

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[153] I believe Hick would agree, since it is one's own experiences that affirm her religious cognitions.

(c) It has the merits of what Burke called 'prejudice', of which he wrote: "Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved."

All three of these are good reasons for not giving up one's present beliefs, whatever they are, whenever the balance of evidence or argument appears to tilt against them. A certain tenacity in believing must be accounted an essential intellectual virtue.[154]

Mitchell does note three problems here: 1) "One's prejudices may not accord with the truth"; 2) "The man who is prejudiced on principle is deprived of free and unfeigned intercourse with his fellows"; and 3) "One's beliefs will ossify unless one is prepared to modify them in the light of criticism."[155] I do not believe these objections impact to any great extent on the hard religious exclusivist who will reject the truth claims of other religions and will reject criticism of her beliefs. They may well hold for the non or weak believer in any particular belief system. The skeptic may doubt there can be any demonstrable truth claims. Mitchell's point seems to be that, barring an extremely significant exhibition of the non-veridical nature of her beliefs, the hard religious exclusivist should most likely be expected to maintain her belief structures and thus would not be expected to embrace hard religious pluralism, for to do so would place her much sought after compensators in jeopardy.

However, one is still left to speculate upon what purpose, if any, embracing hard religious pluralism would in fact achieve in the area of providing supernatural compensators in a future existence. Character-building aside, does hard religious pluralism offer any other benefits to its adherents? This question is but one of many that face those with religious world views, but it is directed once again to the heart of the problem: What does religion do for the person who holds to its views and requirements? For James, the answer is clear. Religion is a happy state for those who have found it, and it gives meaning to their temporal lives, while it also offers something that transcends life itself. It not only builds character, but it resolves the fears of this life and is a touch point with the Transcendent Ultimate Reality. He says,

[a]nd here religion comes to our rescue and takes our fate into her hands. There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our mortal death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away.[156]

While we can perhaps understand that James' view of religion also incorporates Hick's requirement of character-building, we can also see that it offers much more and obliquely

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[154] Basil Mitchell, *How to Play Theological Ping-Pong: And Other Essays on Faith and Reason* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 17-18.

[155] Ibid., 18-19.

[156] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1911; repr., Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002), 47.

encapsulates Stark and Bainbridge's idea of "supernatural compensators" for the fears and vagaries of this lifetime, and it does so by addressing the Transcendent Ultimate Reality, albeit from a Christian perspective (certainly the non-theistic religions could also find familiar grounds here in James). Additionally, James is here also aligned with Hick's religiously oriented individual who sees the world in such terms. Note the lack of any particular dogmatic expression (except perhaps the idea of a life, or salvation, [perhaps liberation?] after this one).

However, James is also well aware of the transcendent side of religion:

> "I accept the universe" is reported to have been the favorite utterance of our New England transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller; and when someone repeated this phrase to Thomas Carlyle, his sardonic comment is said to have been: "Gad! she'd better!" At bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily and altogether? . . . Morality pure and simple accepts the law of the whole which it finds reigning, so far as to acknowledge and obey it, but it may obey with the heaviest and coldest heart and never cease to feel it as a yoke, but for religion, in its strong and fully developed manifestations, the service of the highest never is felt as a yoke. Dull submission is left far behind, and a mood of welcome, which may fill any place on the scale between cheerful serenity and enthusiastic gladness, has taken its place.[157]

This latter observation is particularly telling with respect to the individual who has developed a strong religious belief system, which frames her approach to life and the transcendent elements of which she finds it to be comprised. She has confidence that her life exhibits value and she embraces it. However, James, throughout this work, eschews formalized religious systems and finds that, for those who are religiously minded, religion is a very personal experience. In fact, for James, the personal experience of the transcendent cannot be used as a proof of the existence of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality that others are required to accept. It is wholly the individual's own experience: "Whatever its ultimate significance may prove to be, this is certainly one fundamental form of human experience. Some say that the capacity or incapacity for it is what divides the religious from the merely moralistic character. With those who undergo it in its fullness, no criticism avails to cast doubt on its reality. They *know;* for they have actually *felt* the higher powers, in giving up the tension of their personal will."[158] While this religiously minded individual might approach the esoteric type of Schuon, James allows that anyone is open to a personal experience of the Transcendent. In fact, he finds that most such experiences are highly individualistic and outside formal religious frameworks.

While it is certainly possible for religiously minded individuals to come to such an awareness of the Transcendent on their own, it is perhaps more common that they do so within the contexts of their own cultures and the religious systems with which they are familiar. Hick quite rightly points out that traditional religious world views often oppose each other, claiming sole truths for themselves, but, at least in the Jamesian context, individuals, acting out their moral inclinations within a transcendent awareness, can certainly see beyond the dogmatic interpretations of their own religious systems and embrace others of the same mind set. They can continue to participate in their own

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[157] Ibid., 41.

[158] Ibid., 110.

liturgical practices and worship services, practicing traditional forms of devotion, but they can also be aware that others use their own seemingly different practices to act out their own responsibilities towards the Transcendent Ultimate Reality as they have come to know and experience it.

However, the problem of such individual religious experiences lies, as Hick has already noted, in the cultural/religious influences that predispose individuals to come to terms with the Transcendent Ultimate Reality by means of that with which they are familiar. Individuals brought up in a Christian societal framework are most likely to view their unique experience in terms that mesh well within their predisposed belief system. They might then fail to grasp the significance of such experiences by others who may make opposing claims for what they themselves have experienced. And, of course, Hick sees this as a negative thing, especially when it leads to religious intolerance. But is there anything positive in James' idea of a personal religious experience which can benefit the experiencer?

The answer to this question can be given in the affirmative only if we can come to terms with the question of truth, which seems to be the impetus and underlying problem for Hick. Certainly, Hick's idea that the universe is religiously ambiguous has problems for those seeking hard and fast expressions of absolute truth in the religious context. Given Hick's thesis that the universe is religiously ambiguous, we are left with two possibilities: either the Real exists or it does not exist. Neither of these positions is verifiable on the surface, but underlying the question is the possibility that the Real does exist, that there is a Transcendent Ultimate Reality behind the natural world, and this is good enough for Hick. In fact, the pluralistic hypothesis rests upon this presupposition, eschatological verification notwithstanding. However, Hick also introduces a problem for any attempt at gaining the truth in religious matters because his Kantian heritage discounts knowing the Real in any meaningful or truthful way. All we can do is see the world religiously, and apply the lens of our own culture to our experiences, thus rendering our claims about the Real as best as we can. While this might seem problematic, Hick escapes the problem by insisting that we cannot know the truth in religion until it is revealed or verified at death; hence, his lack of concern about the truth in religion. What Hick does claim is that it is possible that many religions can and do hold some truth, and this is shown in their character-building efficacy which has salvation/liberation fruits visible for all to see. Furthermore, as Weening notes, when speaking of Hick's own conceptual development,

> [w]hat has indeed changed over the years then is not Hick's commitment to the cognitive nature of religious truth-claims but rather his understanding of the "truth" in religious truth claims. By the mid 1970's at the latest, Hick had abandoned a positive definition of truth, and turned his attention to the positive practical *effects* of truth *claims*. To restate this: Hick is not interested in "truth". His interest is in truth claims. And more precisely: his interest is *conflicting* truth-claims. And he deals with them by *de-absolutizing* the conception of truth, de-substantializing it and de-divinizing it. His active, practical interest is confined to what we might call the role played by the idea of "truth" in human life—i.e., its effectiveness in re-orienting human life. "The truthfulness of a myth is thus a practical truthfulness, consisting in its capacity to orient us rightly in our lives."[159]

But what is truth, and is it unchanging? Regardless of how we answer, what is important to note is that truth can vary culturally and historically; the truth of many matters is written by those with the power to assert their own versions of it upon others (but "truth is written by the victors" is not

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[159] Weening, *Whose Truth?* 157.

necessarily something a hard religious exclusivist would agree with).[160] Truth is often a matter of pragmatic concern rather than verifiable certainty. Of course, any discussion of pragmatism must eventually lead once again to the writings of William James: "The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. . . . The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences."[161] James does not concern himself with trying to get at empirical or absolute truth but is concerned with what effect a truth claim has upon the one who accepts it.

This concept of pragmatism is certainly evident in Hick's quest for the embracing of hard religious pluralism, but perhaps in a way unintended by him. That is to say, Hick rightly notes the effect of various religions' practices on the characters of their adherents, and he follows the Buddha in acknowledging that what we cannot absolutely prove should be tabled and removed from what divides groups of adherents to various systems of religious beliefs. What Hick questions is how such beneficial results can come about when religious believers hold such different and mutually exclusive truth claims. His solution is revisionist and reductionist. Hick would have each religion be reduced to its fundamental dogmatic formulations; he would then revise them, when they are seen to be problematic for his theory, by reinterpreting them as myths or as problems of language. However, the pragmatist might view such differences in beliefs as fundamental to the character-building of individuals who have a definite and personal experience of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality. For instance, an intense experience of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality as an all-encompassing source of love would be a positive character-building influence for a person who operates within a theistic framework of belief. There is no need to argue that this framework denies validity to the non-theistic belief systems because their adherents can approach the concept of love from within their own systems without denying the theistic believer her truth claim about the loving nature of God. As James continues: "What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right."[162] To further bring home this point, James offers a practical observation that I believe can be used to find some common ground between the pluralist and the exclusivist camps. James refers to Charles Pierce's article, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." He notes that

> Mr. Pierce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that, to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct for us is its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reaction we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate

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[160] See again the Ehrman discussion in Chapter 2.

[161] William James, *Pragmatism* (1907; repr., Amherst: Prometheous Books, 1991), 23 (hereafter cited as *Pragmatism*).

[162] Ibid.

or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance for all.[163]

The foregoing is the essence of pragmatism for James. For the purpose of this thesis, I point out that such a position is cognizant of the effects of a belief, stemming from an experience of the object of that belief, not from an analysis of its empirical validity. Thus, we can see here that it should not be surprising to Hick that entirely different and mutually exclusive systems of belief can produce efficacious results in their believers. What I believe should surprise Hick is that such positive beliefs can be held in tandem with expectations of much sought after supernatural compensators: that is, individuals can experience the Transcendent Ultimate Reality in entirely different ways: their characters can be positively molded, and their belief structures can sustain their hopes of an afterlife/liberation for which this temporal life is but a mere prelude.

I strongly suspect that Hick would not find the foregoing at all appealing since he is determined to reduce all contradictory truth claims to a common source. However, it must be remembered that his entire thesis is dependent upon the possibility that the Transcendent Ultimate Reality exists. Further exacerbating such a thesis is his later modification of it to include the non-theistic religions' hope that the claims for non-existence or nothingness are also true. Thus Hick would have an individual embrace both extremes of the existence continuum and come to believe both of their possibilities. That is to say, Hick believes that we can each believe that the Transcendental Ultimate Reality exists and that it does not exist. But surely this is a call for faith in concepts that depend upon individual choices of belief.

Another difficulty arises here when Hick tries to fix truth to a particular time and place. Doing so certainly manifests a variety of contrary truth claims. But we are called to remember that truth is both elusive and ever-changing: it is layered upon previous experiences, and it needs to address pressing issues in the lives of believers.[164] Once again, a pragmatic approach may be both helpful and germane to this discussion. James, commenting upon previous work carried out by Friedrich Schiller and John Dewey, says,

> "truth" in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science. It means, they say, nothing but this, *that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience,* to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*.[165]

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[163] Charles Pierce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in *Popular Science Monthly* (January 1878), in ibid., 23-24.

[164] For instance, in the Anglican Communion, previous dogmatic prohibitions against marriage after divorce and the ordination of women have been revised (although not without firm resistance in some quarters), and the institution of marriage, long held to be restricted solely to that between a man and a woman, is receiving worldwide review.

[165] James, *Pragmatism,* 28.

James is elucidating the "instrumental" theory of truth wherein theories are only instruments by which we attempt to gain access to truth (of course, pragmatism allows us to move forward with truth as we understand it). This view certainly meshes well with Hick's early postulation that the original message received from the Transcendental Ultimate Reality has been modified and subjected to varying historical and cultural influences. What Hick seems to ignore is that rather than simply being totally exclusive of others' truth claims, such modifications serve a particular purpose within the world view of those who hold them. Further,

> [t]he observable process which Schiller and Dewey particularly singled out for generalization is the familiar one by which any individual settles into *new opinions*. The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble [cognitive dissonance?] to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. . . . until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum disturbance of the latter, . . . This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit of novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An *outrée* explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less eccentric. . . . New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.[166]

This may well be applicable to Mitchell's third problem: "One's beliefs will ossify unless one is prepared to modify them in light of criticism." The challenge may well be to continue to hold to beliefs that both work and have not been shown to be wrong in the face of an ever expanding range of new thoughts and concepts.

Several observations follow from this account of ever-changing truth. The first is that it demonstrates what I believe is a progression in Hick's own thinking. He once fully embraced a theistic world view within the Christian context. He was a committed fundamentalist in his early years, saying that he

> was struck with immense force by Jesus' parables and sayings, the story of his life, and the impression of his personality as living lord and savior. I can remember well a period of several days of intense mental and emotional turmoil during which I was powerfully aware of a higher truth and greater reality pressing in upon my consciousness and claiming my recognition and response. At first this intrusion was highly unwelcome, a disturbing and challenging demand for nothing less than a revolution in personal identity. But presently the disturbing claim became a liberating invitation and I entered with great joy into the world of Christian faith. At this stage I accepted as a whole and without question the entire evangelical package of theology . . . Intending now to enter the Christian ministry, I joined the Presbyterian Church of England.[167]

Here we see a progression of Hick's own truth development, from fundamentalist, to

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[166] Ibid., 29-30. Perhaps the "trouble" referred to here is an example of the rise of cognitive dissonance.

[167] Hick, *Names,* 14-15.

evangelical, to denominational Christian beliefs. The further evidence of his *truth transition* is exhibited in what may be described as a release from cognitive dissonance wherein his experience of a plurality of religious experiences exposed to him the paradox of many differing truth claims creating similar individuals of high character. This Birmingham experience finally led to his rejection of his earliest established religious beliefs and his adoption of hard religious pluralism with the eventual acceptance of the truth of salvation/liberation. In reviewing Hick's religious development, from fundamentalist to pluralist, we can clearly note a series of changes in his religious beliefs. His experiences have individually flavoured his former world views, modifying them in succession, until he has arrived at a seemingly diametrically opposed position to his earliest evangelical Christian stance. While one might suppose that such a series of *truth horizons* might give rise to a deepening cognitive dissonance, Hick seems to have successfully reduced its effects by modifying his previously held truth claims.[168] This modification is readily apparent in his revisionist approach to the long held Christian truth claims which underpinned his original religious world view.

However, as James notes, such extreme calls to modify beliefs (such as the call to embrace hard religious pluralism) are fraught with difficulty due to the "jolt" they apply to one's continuity of truth. Minor adaptations to one's beliefs are something she can accept if they help streamline her thought processes. But the radical claims of hard religious pluralism are difficult to reconcile with the hard religious exclusivist's long established ideas and beliefs about the veracity of her religious faith. They call into question the efficacy of her religion's ability to carry her beyond mere character-building. However, Hick has spent a lifetime developing and modifying his theories in response to critical reviews, and he believes that individuals who see a religious system produce moral believers must be compelled to conclude that there is something unitary behind their mutually exclusive truth claims, something that should lead to salvation/liberation. If there is an element of truth behind them, they must be given parity with all other religions that do so as well. For Hick, once this obvious leap is made, it would seem to follow that hard religious pluralism's call will be answered.

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[168] See Selengut, *Sacred,* 66-69.

CONCLUSION
The Efficacy of the Pluralistic Hypothesis

Throughout the course of researching John Hick's works and philosophy, one is struck by the breadth and depth of his thinking and by the sincerity in his quest to be all-encompassing and respectful in his approach to the question of truth in religious systems. His most strident critics are virtually unanimous in their praise of his clarity of speech and his grasp of religious thought. Hick has provided an abundance of grist for the mills of the philosophy of religion, which will no doubt continue to address his contributions for many years to come. He has asked us to think about and to then rethink our long held views of religions, especially their dogmatic implications that often lead to disharmony and sometimes to violence and condemnation. His pre-eminent voice for the pluralistic hypothesis is one to be reckoned with by anyone attempting a serious inquiry into religion in general and particularly into the lives of adherents and the effects of religion upon the various cultures of the world.

By way of conclusion I wish finally to address the series of questions raised in the introduction to this thesis. The foregoing chapters have been quite broad in order to showcase the vast array of Hick's several philosophies of religion and to introduce a series of critiques applicable to them. In particular, his endorsement and formulation of the pluralistic hypothesis, especially of hard religious pluralism, as I have so labeled it, has been treated. What remains is to determine the effects, if any, that adoption of this hypothesis would have on the religious life of a person who is called to make the choice to embrace it. That is to say, is there a possibility that Hick could persuade someone with firmly held religious beliefs to adopt a hard pluralist stance? If so, what would be the effect on the person's long held faith and belief in both the truth of her religion and its efficacy in her life?

In Chapter Three I have addressed the various implications that such a call might have on the hard religious exclusivist on the one hand, and the non-religious individual or skeptic on the other. The result of that analysis has a certain air of subjectivity about it. That is to say, the call for the adoption of hard religious pluralism might be answered by some, but rejected by others. I think that this might be indicative of the subjectivity of religious experience and faith in general that lies at the core of the beliefs of most religious persons. Although some might argue that there are absolute truths in theology,[169] that is not necessarily something that Hick would hold to be accessible to us in this lifetime, especially since his fundamental basis of argumentation stems from his view that the universe is religiously ambiguous. Since he believes we cannot determine which religious claims are true and which are false, Hick has concluded that there must be some element of truth in any religion that produces both ethical fruits and salvation/liberation.[170] Those doing so must therefore be given parity with the others. That being the case, the answers to the questions raised in this thesis will, by necessity, remain rather subjective. While some, expecting definitive answers, may find these

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[169] See, for instance, J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *"Theories of Truth and Postmodernism,"* in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[170] Hick says, when commenting on those coming to a "new reconciled relationship to God," that "the new quality of life arising within that relationship are facts of experience and observation. It is this reality of persons transformed, . . . from self-centredness to God-centredness that constitute the substance of Christian salvation." Hick, *Interpretation,* 44.

conclusions unsatisfying, I believe they will, nevertheless, put Hick's call to embrace hard religious pluralism into a context that does address the efficacy of his form of religious pluralism.

Prior to addressing these questions, we must remember that this thesis has noted several gradations of religious persons: ranging from the hard religious exclusivist through to the hard religious pluralist. I believe it is apparent that if we can eliminate the extreme positions, the possibility of Hick's quest to reduce religious intolerance might be achieved, but this would be at the expense of his own position. What I mean by this is that the classic paradigm of divergence in religious positions is between what I have called the hard religious exclusivists on the one hand and the hard religious pluralists on the other. It seems to follow that they are mutually exclusive systems of religious beliefs, or beliefs about religion. They do not necessarily give rise to violence themselves, but both certainly could indicate a position of religious judgement or intolerance.[171] Therefore, as outlined above, it is most unlikely that either camp would be able to embrace any degree of the other's religious world view. That being the case, I have noted, however, that those adopting either a soft religious pluralist position, or a soft religious exclusivist position, could interact with and appreciate others' positions while still holding to their own original tenets of faith and belief. They could acknowledge and participate in religious diversity to varying degrees without doing violence to their original religious systems, and they would keep intact their ultimate hopes for salvation/liberation offered by such systems. They could in fact adopt some of the unique aspects of other religions and adapt them to their own long held practices in new and meaningful ways.[172]

With these observations in mind, I now wish to address the opening questions of this thesis. The first question to address is: Am I open to the possibility that other religions contain some truth, or, conversely, can I accept that my religion does not have the whole truth? It would seem to be self evident that the answer here for the hard religious exclusivist would be a resounding No! She maintains her hope in her religon's efficacy in directing her to the attainment of the supernatural compensators she so fervently desires; any deviation from the claims of her religion to do so must necessarily weaken its ability in this area; if some other system could accomplish as much, perhaps she should look at the alternative system, but that might negate what she already has without really convincing her that it can accomplish as much as her current religion. Such a shift for the hard religious exclusivist might well destroy her established beliefs and faith, while not replacing them with anything of substance. It may affect her status in her own family, culture, and religious system.

But if we can acknowledge the possibility that exclusivism might range in its degrees of exclusion, the answer to the first question might take on a different aspect. Clearly, the soft religious exclusivist might be able to acknowledge that truths are evolutions of thought and they are culturally biased. What this person might acknowledge is that, since his religion provides what he needs and

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[171] The hard religious exclusivist position is often branded as intolerant and judgmental. However, the hard religious pluralist position, which calls for the revision or abandonment of the central tenets of various religions, seems guilty of the same charges. It ignores the believer's faith in the efficacy of her own system's teachings for her and insists that she must see the obvious merits of hard religious pluralism at the expense of her own long held belief system.

[172] For instance, many Christians have found great benefits from practicing various forms of Buddhist meditation. On the other hand, Buddhists are now adopting what is popularly known as "engaged Buddhism" wherein they follow the examples of service to others espoused in other religious traditions.

what he hopes for, the same may well be true for persons of other religions, especially for those who hope for something quite different (e.g., the salvation vs. liberation dichotomy that Hick addresses). Certainly, the eastern philosophies of non-creation and nothingness serve those hoping for liberation very well.[173] The soft religious exclusivist can continue to hold to the truth claims of his own religion which underlie his beliefs in its efficacy for promoting his attainment of supernatural compensators, while allowing the opposite position to be efficacious for one hoping for something which seems to be entirely different. In addition, he might also accept that the sincere beliefs and devotions he observes in the followers of other religions are indicators of the possibility of the efficacy of other systems to also provide what their followers are seeking. That being the case, he might well accept that other religions contain truths even if these seem incompatible with his own religious truths. They may simply be culturally biased views of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality or views of its differing facets, those unknown or hitherto not revealed to him through his system of belief. Finally, there may indeed be differing paths for the journeys of the religious who will eventually arrive at the same mountaintop of the knowledge of the Transcendent Ultimate Reality.

Accepting the position that one's religion does not contain the whole truth should not of necessity sound the death knell of it for him. For instance, the vast divergences between the various Christian denominations have not necessarily made the Christian faith false or irrelevant to its adherents; they simply often focus on different aspects of Christianity, even to the exclusion of others. The same holds true for the differing sects of Islam and Buddhism. If there can be differing truth claims within an overall religious system, there can certainly be differing claims between the world religions without necessarily negating their veracity for their adherents. In this respect, Hick's call for rethinking, or reapplying, certain dogmatic claims and examining them in a new light or context might serve a useful purpose. However, his call to reduce fundamental religious claims, those that define and make a religion unique, to myth or problems of language goes well beyond what most religious practitioners could accept and still find to value in their established faiths and beliefs.

Certainly, for the hard religious pluralist, such a question does not pose a problem. She readily accepts Hick's claim that all religions must contain some truth. However, she does not base this necessarily on any particular faith or belief which she holds as a result of her own religious beliefs, but on what she sees as the result of religious participation: the character-building aspect of religion and its orientation of adherents towards salvation/liberation. That being the case, the hard religious pluralist, who has accepted Hick's call, must still be left to wonder, first, how mere character-building alone leads one to salvation/liberation, and, second, if that is all there is to religious belief, why not just ignore doctrinal claims and commands and practice morality for its own sake? That is to say, in the first instance, it appears that any accomplishment of salvation/liberation is attained solely by the person living a moral life, for doing so will certainly not impede in any way her attaining her goal of salvation/liberation; she will attain this goal through her own efforts without requiring the active intervention of grace or the Transcendent Ultimate Reality in her life. She will simply learn the moral code espoused by her religious system; she will practice it, and she will earn her reward for herself. In the second instance, she could accomplish virtually the same result through

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[173] For instance, a philosophy of non-creation stems from the ideas of the universe being eternal and not created, or even cyclical in nature with many evolutions of the universe. Thus a doctrine of liberation from existence is more compatible with this philosophy than salvation of an eternal soul.

any number of self-help sources without the necessity of being religious for, if her religion is found to be false for her, she may have based her ideas of morality on an erroneous concept and will be frustrated in her attempts to achieve her desired goals.[174]

Having outlined the possibility that some persons can indeed embrace varying degrees of religious pluralism through accepting the possibility that other religions also contain truth, we can now address the second question: If that is the case, do I have to give up some of my own religious beliefs? In Chapter Three I noted that the hard religious exclusivist would certainly have difficulty maintaining her feet in two camps: the belief that her religion is the supreme source of truth and the contrary belief that all religions contain truth, no matter how divergent their claims might be. It is unlikely that she could maintain this posture unless she embraced Hick's reductionist and revisionist formulations. That is, she must first agree with Hick that religions can be reduced to their dogmatic statements, and she must then agree that their different abstractions must be reconciled by revising them in order to eliminate their exclusive natures and claims. Using the Christian example, creedal formulations expressing basic tenets of the Christian faith have undergone various iterations, both cultural, and confessional. While the early Church struggled over what exactly comprised Christian doctrine, a number of councils addressed the problem until a reasonable consensus was obtained at Nicea in 325 A.D. and at Constantinople in 381 A.D. But history has shown that formal statements of what Christianity is were continually being developed, especially in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation.[175] Each new denomination or sect attempts to codify its beliefs to ensure conformation by its followers, or to reaffirm its link to the original and *true* Christian Church. The point here is that religions are much more than what comprises their dogmatic claims. They are systems of worship, prayer, offerings, meditation, and sacrifice, to name but a few. We cannot expect that merely reducing them to their contrary statements and then redefining these will somehow remove conflicting claims; yet, such is the call sounded by hard religious pluralists in the name of concord.

The same can be said of various Buddhist sects. For Theravadans, the Buddha was not originally divine, but he established a great moral system to address suffering, the hopelessness of the caste system, and the continuing cycles of *samsara*, or birth, death, and rebirth. However, his later divinization in the various Mahayana schools indicates a perhaps greater sense of the importance of his teachings and the efficacy of his Eight Fold path, which leads followers to liberation. In spite of this development, a revision of Buddhism to the original human state of the Buddha might, in the name of hard religious pluralism, be called for in order to make its claims more palatable to the Western religious systems.[176]

The foregoing points suggest that the hard religious exclusivist will, logically need to give up some of her strongly held religious beliefs in order to embrace hard religious pluralism. Failure to

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[174] Arguably, a morality based on a "noble lie" would allow her to engage socially with those likewise deceived; however, Hick's eschatological thesis would eventually reveal the truth to her, after she dies, and she would fail in her quest for salvation/liberation.

[175] Cf. Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

[176] Cf. Lopez, *Scriptures*.

do so might give rise to some form of cognitive dissonance, but doing so may well be fraught with other implications. These will be examined momentarily. The soft religious exclusivist might, however, embrace a soft form of religious pluralism in which he can accept the divine nature of beings other than the ones in his own religious world view, or at least might accept that followers of other systems of religion can rightly hold to the divinity of their own religious figures because in doing so they believe they are led to salvation/liberation. At the very least he can see that these individuals have developed high moral characters in their quests to follow the commands of their divine figures. He will therefore hold to his own religious beliefs while allowing the same privilege to those who hold different and contradictory beliefs.

It would seem, therefore, that the individual with strongly held religious beliefs, working within a religious framework that provides an efficacious eschatological hope, will most likely resist the call to hard religious pluralism, for she cannot do so without either abandoning or modifying the unique claims her particular religion imposes on her. Such demands are shrouded within the cultural and religious world view which defines her and within which she finds direction and meaning. Additionally, these demands may also be stringent and explicitly restrictive on her ability to be inclusive of other forms of religious thought and practice. However, the severity of the demands may be offset by the value of the rewards, or compensators, that she so fervently desires and believes are attainable through adherence to her belief system; her faith is both founded upon and justified by her expectation of reward. Anyone familiar with stories of martyrs within any religious tradition can readily appreciate the firm and unswerving desire of individuals who will never abandon the tenets of their faiths and will even die in expectation of their rewards for holding steadfast to their faiths.[177]

The final question remains: What is the effect on faith if I abandon or modify my beliefs? Once again, this is a very subjective question, but the foregoing has offered a number of conclusions that might be derived. Certainly, the person claiming a particular religious affiliation, but who has no strongly held religious views might have little difficulty here. Perhaps she was brought up with certain teachings, but later failed to identify with them or continue on within the religious system of her forebears, so she may have no qualms about letting go of some of the central tenets of the faith of her parents simply because she has never fully adopted this faith as her own. She may identify herself with a particular denomination, but never participate in it to any degree outside of the services it provides such as marriage or burial.[178] Or she may have intermarried with someone of another faith and embraced it or worked out a series of compromises between the two. That is to say, she has no strongly held religious beliefs and is quite prepared to, for instance, revise her belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and accept the position that he was simply a great teacher or a moral model on which to base one's life and decisions. Such an abandonment of her early beliefs would make her comfortable with those who espouse admiration for many great religious figures, including the

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[177] Here we should be reminded that the word "martyr" derives from the Greek *"μάρτυς"* or "martus" which refers to witnessing to or attesting to something. In this case a martyr attests to the truth of the claims of her religion and its tenets to the point of dying for her faith in its veracity. See *Liddel and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889).

[178] See Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1987).

Buddha, Gandhi, Mohammad, and many others.

The greater question here, however, centres on what it is that a religion does for the deeply religious individual who is asked to embrace all of the tenets of hard religious pluralism. To do so, one must accept the central theme that all of the world's great religious systems have a single core of revelation from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality that lies behind their seemingly mutually exclusive truth claims. The uniqueness of each religion must be absorbed into a mutual consensus of belief common to all of them. One must therefore reassess her cherished, perhaps smugly,[179] held beliefs that (a) she has received the truth of revelation, and that (b) others are mistaken in their similarly held views and hopes. This person is one for whom her religion, and adherence to its tenets, holds out for her a sure means to salvation/liberation; it is a means of compensating her for the vagaries of her temporal life; and it is something that will guide her and mold her in the morality and religious practices she believes are mandatory to the attainment of her eschatological hopes. But in order to become a true hard religious pluralist, she must reduce, modify, and restate whatever tenets of her faith are found to be contradictory to the aim of hard religious pluralism. However, it seems clear that revising or reducing one's unique religious claims must impact one's religious beliefs. If salvation comes to the Christian solely through the claims that Christ died for him and that Christ is God with the power to ensure salvation, any attempt to reinvent Christ and reduce him to a great teacher or moralist will impact negatively on the transcendent aspect of his godly nature and power. In fact, any attempt to reinvent the Christian concept of God and God's usual attributes[180] comes dangerously close to impoverishing the Christian God and any salvific power associated with the belief in these attributes. She is called to gamble with her salvation in order to eliminate obstructions that her religious world view might pose to hinder the full attainment of hard religious pluralism.

There seems, therefore, to be a rather high price to be paid by the deeply religious person who answers the call to accept and embrace hard religious pluralism. She will have to trade what she knows[181] to be true for something (a) that may or may not be true and (b) that has yet to offer her any particular means to attain her eschatological desires—she must make an inductive leap. That is to say, hard religious pluralism is an apparent framework for interfaith dialogue, recognition of others' values, reassessment of one's own values and beliefs, and a means to diffuse tensions over religious claims. But it is not a system that offers any hope for the attainment of salvation/liberation, something that lies at the core of what it is that Hick believes religion should do for believers. Hard religious pluralism does not have any particular claim to any promises or any insights stemming from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality. It is merely a lens through which to view others who hold religious beliefs, and therefore it cannot do any of the heavy lifting that those with eschatological hopes require. Hard religious pluralism is *not* a religion, but a philosophical position which attempts to address the

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[179]   I refer here to those who, through their cultural biases, tend to view their own cultures and religions from a superior point of view.

[180]   Omnipotence, for example.

[181]   At the very least Hick would agree that such knowledge (or cognition) is something she has constructed from her experiencing the world religiously and is based on her cultural influences. This religious knowledge is real for her, and it is efficacious in her life.

epistemological challenges associated with the myriad systems of faith and belief found within the great world religions. As such, it has its merits, but it cannot hope to replace religion in the lives of the religious. In the end, religious individuals must rely upon the tenets of their individual faiths to achieve their goals, but the danger here is that the call to embrace hard religious pluralism may well jeopardize the efficacy of their religious systems as they have come to believe in them.

AFTERWORD

John Hick continues to theorize about religious questions, and is still writing books and articles on the subject. One is left to speculate on the future development of his form of religious pluralism. Only time will tell to what degree his philosophy of religion will be received. It must be remembered, however, that Hick has never endorsed a one world religion. He merely holds that all religions are capable of having some truth. Religious pluralism is therefore not a religion by any definition that this thesis has examined. However, it has already developed several theoretical features: the axial age theory, the underlying unity of religions, the view of exclusive dogmatic utterances as mere myth or legend or problems of language, and the necessary inclusiveness of all forms of religions that offer character-building as a prelude to salvation/liberation. What remains to be seen is if it makes any future claims to divine revelation and guidance from a Transcendent Ultimate Reality. Should the latter obtain, John Hick must then join the long list of charismatic religious innovators that have influenced the direction of religion down through the ages. He will be seen as a prophet announcing a new age of religious cooperation and renewal.

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