

INCONSISTENCIES BETWEEN JOHN HICK'S RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY
AND RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY UNDERMINE HIS PLURALISTIC
HYPOTHESIS IN *AN INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION*

A Paper

Submitted to Dr. Fred Smith

of the

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

Seminar on Pluralism and World Religions: APOL 950

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November 16, 2014

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INTRODUCTION

For John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis to successfully function in his book *An Interpretation of Religion*—the magnum opus of his life's work as a philosopher of religion—a metaphysical Transcendent exists, but without any religious baggage of positive/negative ontological specificity. Simply put, applying Immanuel Kant's epistemology to religion, Hick's noumenal Real-in-itself is separated absolutely from phenomenal human descriptions of it. As such, religious experiences of the Transcendent are pragmatically true for that particular religion, but not literally true of the Transcendent itself; which, subsequently, validates every religion's traditions and teachings regardless of how they may differ from one another. Unfortunately, when setting the philosophical foundations of religious ambiguity and religious epistemology in his book, Hick, consciously or unconsciously, introduces inconsistencies which undermine his Pluralistic Hypothesis. To substantiate this claim, the following three sections in Hick's book will be examined: Part Two, where Hick contends that both theistic and atheist philosophical arguments are inconclusive and thus cannot establish either the certainty or the probability of the existence/non-existence of the Divine, leaving the universe religiously ambiguous. Part Three, where Hick contends that the reality of religious experience provides the rationality for religious belief, so non-realist, naturalistic interpretations of religious experience are inadequate, reductionistic representations of Ultimate Reality. Part Four, where Hick presents his Pluralistic Hypothesis as a way to reconcile the existence of a singular metaphysical Transcendent and multiple, mutually-exclusive, yet soteriologically authentic, religious traditions.

While Hick is able to produce an internally coherent argument for pluralism in Part Four using strategic bifurcations in Part Two and Part Three, when examined from outside of his Pluralistic Hypothesis, these bifurcations appear arbitrarily placed to cover up philosophical inconsistencies. To be sure, Hick would maintain that these bifurcations simply highlight important distinctions in the development of his book's argument so accusations of inconsistency are unwarranted. Nevertheless, it is the thesis of this paper that Hick's inconsistencies between his argument for religious ambiguity and his argument for religious epistemology act as detractors from rather than support for his Pluralistic Hypothesis. With this in mind, this paper's format will be as follows: First, an overview of Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis will act as an important introduction to his comprehensive, interlocking philosophical system of thought, from which he, implicitly or explicitly, draws all of the book's content. Second, an examination of

Hick's case for the religious ambiguity of the universe due to the philosophical inconclusiveness of natural theology and naturalism will reveal Hick's biased presuppositionalism, which explains not only his weighing of evidence always in his own favor but also his penchant for introducing unnecessary bifurcations. Third, an examination of Hick's case for religious epistemology reveals not only an unnecessary split between thinking about reality and living in reality but also a shift from cognitive freedom to experiential coercion, where one cannot escape the Real even with a non-realist understanding of religion. Therefore, simply put, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate several significant weaknesses throughout the foundation of Hick's philosophy of religion, which cumulatively places doubt on the superstructure of his Pluralistic Hypothesis.

Finally, a note on methodology. While this paper is critical of Hick throughout its interaction with *An Interpretation of Religion*, the spirit in which the comments are made is not uncharitable. Hick is a seminal figure in contemporary philosophy of religion, and his ideas and arguments deserve careful and respectful examination. For this reason, as much as possible, this paper will allow Hick to make his own case in his own words, and while it will be necessarily truncated, the fundamental essence of his reasoning process will be faithfully conveyed. A usual sign of *ad hominem* attacks or slaying of straw men is when a reviewer only includes highly-selective quotes from the most controversial places and can find absolutely nothing of value in the object of criticism. Agree or disagree, there is much one can learn from studying Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis with intellectual honesty and rational consistency. Nevertheless, this paper's respectful dialogue with Hick will include strong disagreements due to competing meta-narratives regarding Ultimate Reality. Meta-narratives are somewhat like the nose on a person's face; everyone has a nose and it is one of the first things everyone presents to everyone else. Yet, ironically, though attached to one's face, a person's own nose is difficult to see and therefore often forgotten unless a reflecting surface is present. Though Hick passed away in 2012, this paper is an attempt to place a mirror in front of Hick's philosophy of religion "nose" to make explicit several points which, perhaps, had become so familiar to him that he forgot what it looked like to others.

I. HICK'S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS: A PHILOSOPHICAL META-NARRATIVE

Even though Hick's interpretation of religions as human responses to the Transcendent is presented linearly and progressively in his book—culminating with his seminal Pluralistic Hypothesis—it is actually a comprehensive, interlocking philosophical system of thought; that is, a meta-narrative. As such, it is beneficial for the purpose of this paper to begin with an overview of Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis and then examine his earlier parts on religious ambiguity and religious epistemology. Put another way, though separated neatly into sections for the benefit of his readers, the mental meta-narrative from which Hick draws the book's content is not similarly segmented so that, consciously or unconsciously, concepts and ideas which are not made explicit until later in his book are nevertheless implicit in every earlier section. However, rather than jump all the way forward to Part Four of Hick's book, where his Pluralistic Hypothesis is explained and illustrated in great detail, I will utilize his *Introduction to the Second Edition*; which is fitting considering it not only condenses the key arguments of the book but it also condenses Hick's response to 15 years of published critical review to his first edition.

Seeking to properly account not only for his own thoughts and experiences from his own religious tradition, but also for the thoughts and experiences from all religious traditions throughout all of human history, Hick first argues for the rationality of religion itself:

The starting point is the religious ambiguity of the universe, the fact that it can be understood and experienced both religiously and naturalistically. But given this ambiguity it is, I argue, entirely rational for those who experience religiously to trust their religious experience and to base their living and believing on it. The principle on which this argument rests has recently been called 'the critical trust approach'. The important qualification indicated by 'critical' is that it is rational to trust our experience *except* when we have some reason to doubt it.... Given that qualification the principle of critical trust is an aspect of what we ordinarily count as sanity.¹

In other words, Hick contends that just as rationally-engaged people are within their epistemic right to normally trust their sense experiences about the physical world, rationally-engaged people are similarly within their epistemic right to normally trust their religious experiences about the metaphysical world.² His analysis about reality, however, cannot stop here because of

¹John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xvii-xviii; also, for a more detailed explanation of this point, see chapter 8 "Natural Meaning and Experience," chapter 11 "Religion and Reality," and chapter 13 "The Rationality of Religious Belief."

²It is interesting to note that while both John Hick and Alvin Plantinga share a similar epistemological approach to properly basic beliefs—compare Hick, "The Rationality of Religious Belief," in *An Interpretation of*

the myriad of different, and even mutually-exclusive, religious experiences and belief-systems humans have had over the history of their existence. Hick explains that the fact of religious diversity can be unified under the fact of a transcendent singularity:

there is an ultimate reality, which I refer to as the Real—though sometimes, because there is no ideal term, also speaking of Ultimate Reality, the Ultimate, the Transcendent—which is in itself transcategorical (ineffable), beyond the range of our human conceptual systems, but whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices.³

Expounding on this idea, he maintains:

that we use something analogous to Kant's distinction between noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearance(s) to human consciousness.... the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is the same world as it appears to human consciousness.... I suggest that... the noumenal Real is thought and experienced by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* which the phenomenology of religion reports.⁴

While admitting that Kant may not have approved of the application of his epistemology to religion, Hick's usage of these two categories—the ineffable noumenal Real and human phenomenal experience—does seem to explain how, for example, one religion worships a personal monotheistic God (e.g., Christianity) while another meditates on an impersonal metaphysical Absolute (e.g., Buddhism); though mutually-exclusive religious meta-narratives, they nevertheless reflect the same “Real,” “Ultimate Reality,” “Ultimate,” or “Transcendent.”

At first glance, Hick's creative application of Kant's epistemology seems to dissolve many significant doctrinal and practical tensions in comparative studies of religion, but his Pluralistic Hypothesis has faced significant and voluminous philosophical criticism.⁵ Though

Religion, 210-29 and Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), 16-91—they are diametrically opposed as to the Ultimate Object of religious belief; a noumenal Real vs. God revealed in Jesus Christ.

³Hick, xix. Also on pp. 248-49 Hick explains why he refers to “the Real” in the singular rather than plural.

⁴Ibid. For more explanation, see also, chapter 14 “The Pluralistic Hypothesis,” chapter 15 “The *Personae* of the Real,” and chapter 16 “The *Impersonae* of the Real”.

⁵Regarding critical review Hick alludes to “the large number of journal articles (over a hundred and thirty) and of critical discussions in books (more than a hundred, ranging from a few pages to a chapter to whole books)” (xvii). The philosophical and theological books he references include: Terry Mathis, *Against John Hick: An Examination of His Philosophy of Religion* (New York: University of America Press), 1985; Gavin D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions* (New York: University Press of America), 1987; Chester Gillis, *A Question of Final Belief: John Hick's Pluralistic Theory of Salvation* (London: Macmillan), 1989; Gregory Carruthers, *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Theocentric Model of the Christian Theology of World Religions: an Elaboration and Evaluation of the Position of John Hick* (Rome: Gregorian University), 1988; Kenneth Rose, *Knowing the Real:*

acknowledging serious and substantive challenges, Hick views such criticism as an opportunity “to develop or modify the hypothesis and thereby strengthen it,”⁶ accordingly, his *Introduction to the Second Edition* is an abbreviated response to fifteen of the most frequently occurring objections and serves as an abbreviated apologetic for his Pluralistic Hypothesis. To begin with, regardless of the religious or non-religious beliefs of his critics, it is not surprising that the first category of objections Hick responds to revolves around his concept of the Real:

This is the transcategorical (or ineffable) Real, to which we cannot apply literally the attributes that we apply to its humanly thought and experienced forms, such as being good, loving, powerful, just, etc.... The reason why we cannot apply these terms to the Real is not that we do not profess to know whether or not they apply... but because all such terms are part of our human conceptual field, the range of ideas embodied in our languages, and according to the pluralistic hypothesis the Real is beyond, or outside, this conceptual field. Further, to speak of God as ineffable should not be confused with a negative in distinction from a positive doctrine. Transcategoriality excludes the attribution of properties either positively or negatively.... We are driven instead to distinguish between the ultimate reality in itself, beyond human description, and the describable mental images of it which we can comprehend and to which we can respond.⁷

Hick continues:

This notion has been challenged on the logical ground that anything, including the Real, must have one or other of any two mutually contradictory qualities, *x* and non-*x*, and therefore cannot be outside the domain of our human concepts. My response has been to appeal to the familiar idea of concepts which do not apply to something either positively or negatively. It does not make sense, for example, to ask whether a molecule is clever or stupid, or whether a stone is virtuous or wicked, because they are not the kinds of thing that can be either. And I have suggested that it does not make sense to ask of the transcategorical Real whether it is personal or non-personal, good or evil, just or unjust, because these concepts do not apply to it—either positively or negatively. My suggestion is that we have to distinguish between what I call *substantial properties* (such as being personal, being good, etc.), which would tell us something significant about the Real, and *purely formal attributes* (such as being able to be referred to) which do not tell us anything significant about it. It is only the latter that can properly be applied to the Real.⁸

John Hick on the Cognitivity of Religions and Religious Pluralism (New York: Peter Lang), 1996; Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Richmond: Curzon), 1998; Harold Hewitt, ed., *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1991; Heather Meacock, *An Anthropological Approach to Theology: A Study of John Hick's Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Lanham: University Press of America), 2000; Christopher Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths: A Critical Study of John Hick's Religious Pluralism* (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press), 2001; Paul Eddy, *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions* (Burlington: Ashgate), 2002; and David Cheetham, *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* (Burlington: Ashgate), 2003.

⁶Hick, *Interpretation*, xvii.

⁷Ibid., xix-xx.

⁸Ibid., xx-xxi (italics added).

For Hick, the noumenal-phenomenal divide is absolute—at least from the human side of the equation—so positive or negative properties originating from phenomenal religious experiences are categorically irrelevant to the noumenal Real; and all religious experiences are phenomenal. Nevertheless, Hick explains, though “we cannot experience the Real directly, as it is in itself... we *can* experience the Real as its presence is mediated to us in the forms made possible by our limited human cognitive capacities;” meaning, “There is a transcendent reality which is the ultimate focus of religious concern but it can only become an object of human awareness in the range of forms made possible by our conceptual repertoire.”⁹ So, according to Hick, “the Real in itself is not a direct object of worship. There is no cult of the Real;”¹⁰ which clarifies why there is a variety of religions with unique systems of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In other words, even though there is a singular Real, Ultimate, or Transcendent upon which all human religious experiences are grounded, there is not also a singular, monolithic religion because there is always an unavoidable human contribution to concrete religious awareness. As such, Hick’s “conceptual repertoire” includes, among other factors, historical, cultural, moral, traditional, geographical, technological, social, psychological, political, linguistic, educational, and philosophical differences. Therefore, on the one hand, there is more than one religion because there is more than one human understanding of ultimate reality, but, on the other hand, human understanding of ultimate reality is largely determined by when, where, and to whom one is born; so only a relatively few highly-developed, systematized religions actually exist despite thousands of years of recorded history and billions of people currently alive.¹¹

The rational validity of this point has been directly challenged by Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43-63.

⁹Hick, *Interpretation*, xxii.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, xxxi.

¹¹As an aside, the circumstantial evidence for the rise, development, and spread of religions coextensive with the rise, development, and spread of civilizations is very strong. Similarly, conflict between and the demise of civilizations is often coextensive with conflict between and the demise of religions: be it a “hot war” between soldiers or a “cold war” between ideas; be it between different civilizations or within a civilization itself; be it between naturalistic atheism, animistic polytheism, divinely-inspired theism, or philosophical pluralism or different versions within the same category. Similarly, the fundamentally interconnected nature of all of the above referenced internal and external environmental factors and their influence on the form religions take is indisputable, as well as religion’s influence on environmental factors. Thus, from a purely sociological standpoint, it is fascinating to trace, for example, not only the “who-what-when-where-why-how” of Buddhism’s development out of Hinduism but also Buddhism’s development itself. It is also interesting to trace how Hinduism shaped Indian culture while Buddhism shaped the cultures of China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, etc. In the same way, one can study Christianity’s rise out of Judaism, atheism’s rise out of modern Western Christianity, and Islam’s rise out of Arabian animistic polytheism. Setting aside reductionistic explanations by atheists, on the one hand, and divine revelation by theists,

As already noted, because of the absolute divide between the noumenal Real and phenomenal experiences, no concrete human description applies literally to the Transcendent even though It is the ultimate ground or source of authentic religious experience. So, on the one hand, Hick emphasizes, “We cannot even speak of this as a thing or entity,” but, on the other hand, “we can make certain purely formal statements about the postulated Real in itself.”¹² The fact of the matter, then, is that Hick is essentially left speechless regarding the Real, but, contrary to his critics, he does not find this to be a problem. Pointing again to Kant’s epistemological model, Hick explains how his Pluralistic Hypothesis simply mirrors what every rational person already accepts, either implicitly or explicitly. Specifically, that enduring physical objects exist outside and independently of a person’s perception of them. Furthermore, there are significant aspects of this physical reality that are invisible to sense perception yet still exert influence upon a person. Finally, a person ignores such facts of reality at his or her own psychological and/or physical peril.¹³ Analogously, there are enduring religious objects which exist outside and independently of a person’s experience of them, significant aspects of these religious objects are invisible to a person’s experience, and a person ignores this reality at his or her own peril.¹⁴ Hick cautions, however:

this does not mean that we are being deceived all the time in either our sensory or our religious experience. It just means that this is the nature of all human cognition. Once this is accepted, *naïve realism*, in both sense perception and religious experience, has to be abandoned and we have to proceed on the basis of the *critical realism* which holds that there is a reality beyond us of which we are aware, but that our awareness is always and necessarily mediated through and limited by our cognitive faculties and conceptual systems.¹⁵

on the other, there is an observable natural evolution to religion that mirrors the evolution of events in world history; “evolution” being defined simply as “change over time.” Nevertheless, as already noted, this is circumstantial evidence so it neither proves nor disproves Hick’s philosophy of religion, but it is not surprising that he includes it in his Pluralistic Hypothesis because of its explanatory scope, power, and plausibility. Simply put, legitimate religious patterns exist, but it is also possible to “find” patterns which substantiate one’s own presuppositions; which is arguably what Hick does when distinguishing between Pre-axial and Post-axial religions in Part One of his book.

¹²Hick, *Interpretation*, 246.

¹³This is also the main argument made by Bertrand Russell in his book *The Problems of Philosophy*, first published in 1912, against idealism and for physicalism [<https://archive.org/details/problemsofphil00russuoft> (accessed November 1, 2014)]. Nevertheless, despite his acceptance of an objective physical world, Hick differs from Russell in that he analogously applies Kant’s epistemological (“transcendental”) idealism to his philosophy of religion. This subsequently allows for the existence of not only an objective physical reality but also an objective metaphysical Ultimate Reality; however, this should not be mistaken as espousing Whiteheadian process theology.

¹⁴Hick, xxiii-xxiv. See also, chapter 8 “Natural Meaning and Experience,” chapter 10 “Religious Meaning and Experience,” chapter 11 “Religion and Reality,” and chapter 13 “The Rationality of Religious Belief.”

¹⁵*Ibid.*, xxxii (italics added).

To be sure, Hick acknowledges, one could question why one should believe that there is some noumenal Real “behind” phenomenal experiences since nothing but purely formal statements can be made about it. His solution points first to the fact of real religious experience, then to the fact of different people having mutually-exclusive, real religious experiences, and finally to his Pluralistic Hypothesis as the only way to reconcile these two facts. “Putting it in Kantian-like terms,” Hick concludes, “the Real is the necessary postulate, not of the moral life as Kant held, but of the global religious life of humanity.”¹⁶ Thus, whereas reductionistic naturalism interprets all religion as pure human invention, Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis acknowledges not only significant human influence in religious experience but also the Real as the ground of experience.

Nevertheless, Hick does not automatically and unconditionally accept the validity of all religious experience any more than he would expect a person to uncritically accept the validity of all physical experience, especially if there are countervailing reasons for doubt (e.g., illusion, misperception, hallucination, etc.). Accordingly, he notes, “There are errors and delusions in other spheres and we must expect there to be such in religion also.... Most of us, for example, are confident that Jim Jones, who induced some nine hundred of his followers to commit suicide with him at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, was religiously deluded.”¹⁷ With this in mind, Hick’s explicitly stated criterion for assessing the validity of religious organizations and movements is “the transformation of human life from self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in a manifestation of the Real, progressively freeing us *from* ego-concern and *for* love and compassion for others.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, he admits, “The result is usually ambiguous. Religious institutions in general have probably done as much harm as good in the long course of history. But some, such for example as the Japanese sect which put sarin gas in the Tokyo underground, and such semi- or pseudo-religious movements as Nazism and Fascism, fail spectacularly under this criterion.”¹⁹ Therefore, in the context of his Pluralistic Hypothesis, the only authentic

¹⁶Ibid., xxxiii; see also, pp. 240-46.

¹⁷Ibid., 217.

¹⁸Ibid., xxvi; see also, chapter 3 “Salvation/Liberation as Human Transformation” and chapter 17 “Soteriology and Ethics.

¹⁹Ibid., xxvi.

“Within our pluralistic hypothesis,” Hick writes, “salvation/liberation is defined as the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” (303). Condemning and rejecting pre-axial religious traditions such as human sacrifice (309), Hick comments that:

religions are those that meet Hick's soteriological criterion, where a person is transformed from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness; though, to be sure, this will look different from religion to religion based on environmental factors and cultural and traditional expressions.

With all of the above in mind, on the one hand, Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis is philosophically and pragmatically noteworthy for its explanatory scope and ability to unify great religious diversity, but, on the other hand, it is also noteworthy for its significant modifications to and drastic reinterpretations of traditional religious self-understanding. Regarding the former, it has already been shown how the Pluralistic Hypothesis explains fundamental unity even between mutually-exclusive religious meta-narratives, such as one that worships a personal monotheistic God (e.g., Christianity) and one that meditates on an impersonal metaphysical Absolute (e.g., Buddhism). The unifying price for such strange bedfellows, however, is exceedingly high and one would be hard-pressed to find devoted followers of any particular religion willing to pay it. Specifically, religions must acknowledge that the majority of their deepest-held beliefs and core traditions are only mythologically true, but not literally true. Hick explains in detail:

This relationship between the ultimate noumenon and its multiple phenomenal appearances, or between the limitless transcendent reality and our many partial human images of it, makes possible mythological speech about the Real. I define a myth as a story or statement which is not literally true but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter. Thus the truth of a myth is a practical truthfulness: a true myth is one which rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms. For we exist inescapably in relation to the Real, and in all that we do and undergo we are inevitably having to do with it in and through neighbors and our world. Our attitudes and actions are accordingly appropriate or inappropriate not only in relation to our physical and social environments but also in relation to our ultimate

It has been self-evident, at least since the axial age, that not all religious persons, practices and beliefs are of equal value. Indeed the great founders and reformers were all acutely dissatisfied with the state of religion around them. Their criticisms have been either metaphysical or theological or, much more often, moral.... Behind all these criticisms, ethical, metaphysical and theological alike, there lies a soteriological concern.... For the function of post-axial religion is to create contexts within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness can take place. Accordingly the basic criterion must be soteriological. Religious traditions and their various components—beliefs, modes of experience, scriptures, rituals, disciplines, ethics and lifestyles, social rules and organizations—have greater or less value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation.” [299-300]

While Hick provides further commentary on and examples of salvation/liberation and culture-relative “saint making” in various religious traditions—which can even include atheists, humanists, and Marxists engaged in social justice (e.g., striving for financial, racial, and gender equality) [see: xli, 306-09]—one cannot help but find this criterion so generalized and malleable that it becomes completely trivial. Not surprisingly, then, Hick admits that he is unable to comparatively judge between the soteriological effectiveness of different traditions because they are equally effective in their own unique way and ultimately follow the same ethic (307; ch. 18 “The Ethical Criterion”).

environment. And true religious myths are accordingly those that evoke in us attitudes and modes of behavior which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real.²⁰

Thus, soteriological speaking, though not literally true, a mythical truth has pragmatic value in that it evokes attitudes and behaviors appropriate to that religion's teachings, subsequently motivating devoted followers to transform—in alignment with their culture and tradition—from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Again, there is nothing literally true about this entire process; except, perhaps, a few small kernels of historical fact buried deep in the origin of the religious practice. Simply put, then, every worshipers' ontological understanding of and fundamental relationship with the Divine is only mythically true and only has pragmatic soteriological value; the noumenal Real is absolutely beyond such human linguistic descriptions.

Hick acknowledges that “This naturally provokes the question, Can mythological truths have any power to move us? Are they religiously relevant?”²¹ If, for example, Christianity's great doctrinal teachings, based on the inspired biblical witness to the person of Jesus Christ, are only mythically true but not literally true, why and how would this still influence a person to move from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness? Hick responds:

To put this more concretely, how can anyone be significantly influenced by the Christian story of God the Son, second Person of the Trinity, being born at Christmas of a virgin mother, dying on the cross to atone for the sins of the world, being bodily resurrected from the dead on Easter, subsequently ascending bodily into the sky, and being present today in the Church through the Holy Spirit, if this is not all believed to be literally true?²²

He continues:

I accept of course that there are very many on the conservative-evangelical and fundamentalist wings of the churches who operate in terms of a naïve realism and who accordingly cannot see this story as other than either a literally true historical narrative or a lie. For them there is nothing in between. Unhappily, their faith is today very vulnerable, for the modern historical study of the New Testament and of Christian origins has made nearly all the historical elements of the story a matter of serious debate and responsible doubt—the one exception being that Jesus, who undoubtedly existed, was executed by crucifixion.²³

To which Hick concludes:

But among many other Christians today within the mainline Churches there is an appreciation of the poetic, or symbolic, or metaphorical, or mythological nature of much

²⁰Ibid., 247-48. See also, xxxiii-xxxvi.

²¹Ibid., xxxiv.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

religious language. They accept and respond to the immense power of Jesus' teachings about how to live, calling us to love our neighbor and even our enemies... and to work for justice and peace throughout the world. But none of this depends upon a literal belief in the miraculous concept of Jesus, or on his having two complete natures, one human and the other divine, or on his bodily resurrection and ascension.... Jesus' moral teaching shines in its own light as true and as claiming our response.²⁴

Not only is this the price that Christianity must pay to gain admittance to Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis, but it is also the price every religion must pay, and Hick is an exacting toll collector. Consequently, throughout his book, when handling various world religions, it is not surprising that Hick, to a greater or lesser degree, does the following two things: (1) he criticizes and dismisses doctrines, beliefs, traditions, practices, narratives, and sacred writings that *do not* fit his Pluralistic Hypothesis, and (2) he feels free to adjust and reinterpret religions according to his own post-modern, Western, post-Christian sensibilities and values so that they *do* fit his Pluralistic Hypothesis.²⁵ Nevertheless, Hick openly acknowledges, when constructing a

²⁴Ibid., xxxv.

²⁵Not surprisingly, Hick explicitly rejects any notion that his Pluralistic Hypothesis is a "Post-Enlightenment western imposition." His first response is "that most 'ordinary believers' within the different traditions assume that the religious beliefs in which they have been brought up are literally true, so that any that are incompatible with them are false; and they often regard any questioning of this as an attack upon their faith." Using Christianity as the example, Hick explains how "traditions have in fact all developed and changed very considerably in the course of time.... the discovery in the nineteenth century of the age of the earth and the process of biological evolution, required the abandonment of the centuries-long assumption that the Bible, literally understood, is verbally inspired by God." As such, the creation narrative, origin of humanity, and understanding of sin "in the first book of the Bible is not factually credible and must be understood as religious myth.... But none of the leading theologians of the twentieth century or today subscribe to biblical literalism. They all accept that there is myth and legend as well as [exaggerated] history in the scriptures" (xxxix). Hick's second argument points to the pre-modern presence of pluralism in Eastern religions, so it is "far from being a modern western discovery which we have foisted on the rest of the world" (xl).

Nevertheless, neither point successfully mutes the culture-relative objection to Hick's own Pluralistic Hypothesis. First, Hick's liberal understanding of Christianity, generalizing comments regarding biblical scholarship, and equivocal description of changing doctrinal traditions are, at best, uncharitable and, at worst, imperialistic. In other words, this is not an "exegetical interpretation" of Christianity but an "eisegetical interpretation" purposely making Christianity—as well as all other religions—fit into his Pluralistic Hypothesis. Second, due to the fact that the ordinary self-understanding of religious practitioners—even "pluralistic" Hinduism—is that their teachings correspond to a literal description of Ultimate Reality—even if acknowledging elements of myth or development in them—Hick's post-modern, Western, post-Christian version of religion will only appeal to those who share his presuppositions. Furthermore, unless Hick actually has perfect knowledge of Ultimate Reality, his noumenal-Real-phenomenal-experiences is just one more option, and not necessarily a better option. Put another way, Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis is a meta-narrative which attempts to coherently describe the existence of all other religions, but Christianity is also a meta-narrative and also has a coherent explanation for the existence of all other religions. However, Hick's post-modern, Western, post-Christian presuppositions preemptively reject Christianity's explanation not only because it is exclusivistic but also because he sees it as only mythically true; however, rationally speaking, Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis is also exclusivistic and only mythically true. Contrary to Christianity, Hick accepts all religions as soteriologically valid, but he does so *only* under the framework of his specific philosophy of religion. Therefore, Hick is correct and everyone else is incorrect; or, in other words, his Pluralistic Hypothesis is a post-Enlightenment, Western imposition.

comprehensive religious interpretation of religion, “it will inevitably have to go beyond the dominant self-understanding of each tradition. For each has come over the centuries to regard itself as uniquely superior.... But this cannot be sustained on impartial grounds. A genuinely pluralistic hypothesis will thus inevitably call, at least by implication, for further development within each of the traditions.”²⁶ Of course, from Hick’s point of view, such further development is neither heretical nor doing violence to religion, rather it is a natural progression consistent with developments that have already occurred historically within each religious tradition. Therefore, Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis necessarily requires an ineffable noumenal Real as the common ground for all humanly-influenced phenomenal religious experiences, leading to a fundamental difference between mythical truth and literal truth when religions describe their Ultimate. All mythical truth, however, has pragmatic soteriological value to motivate transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, which, Hick states, is the highest goal of every true religion.

²⁶Ibid., 2.

II. HICK'S RELIGIOUS AMBIGUITY: NEITHER NATURAL THEOLOGY NOR NATURALISM

Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis is the key to understanding his mature philosophy of religion.²⁷ Whether it is conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit, all roads lead to and emanate from his self-styled Copernican Revolution in religious understanding. The thesis of this paper, however, contends that inconsistencies between Hick's religious ambiguity and religious epistemology undermines his Pluralistic Hypothesis. To begin with, Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis requires the literal existence of a metaphysical Transcendent—a religious interpretation of reality—yet, in Part Two of his book, a purely physical non-Transcendent naturalism—a non-religious interpretation of reality—is presented as equally plausible due to the philosophical inconclusiveness of both theistic and atheistic arguments. As such, it seems that either Hick's religious ambiguity is more descriptive than substantive—since he *does* discount non-religious, naturalistic interpretations of Ultimate Reality—or he is simply highlighting how arguments from natural theology and naturalism are intellectually non-coercive—which he acknowledges is not epistemically required before an argument can serve as warranted proof for a rational person. Neither point is revolutionary nor does it seem to avoid charges of inconsistency unless certain bifurcations are introduced into the argument, but Hick's placement of them seems arbitrary rather than necessary. Therefore, due to the uncomfortable fact that if *any* philosophical argument from either natural theology or naturalism is successful then Hick's *entire* Pluralistic Hypothesis fails, a third possibility is that Part Two is specifically designed to cancel out two of his most serious opponents—theists who claim an ontologically particular Divine via natural theology and atheists who claim the absolute non-existence of the Divine via reductionistic naturalism—so he appears fully justified when presenting his “mediating” position as the solution to the problem of inconclusiveness. As such, one can rightly point out that Hick has a presuppositionally vested interest in the universe remaining “religiously ambiguous,” at

²⁷For a brief discussion of the maturation of Hick's philosophy of religion, see “The Early Stage of John Hick's Pluralism” and “The Second Stage of Hick's Pluralism” in Ronald Nash's book *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 29-52, and Harold Netland, “John Hick's Journey to Pluralism,” in his book *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 158-77. Philosophical development has also occurred in Hick's shifting emphasis on the relationship between the Real and human eschatology; see, Paul Rhodes Eddy, “John Hick's Monotheistic Shadow,” in *Can Only One Religion Be True?* ed. Robert Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 117-37. Nevertheless, Hick's pluralistic epistemology has largely remained consistent throughout; compare Hick's *Argument for the Existence of God* (1971), 101-20 with Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion* (1991), 210-29.

least in the context of philosophical arguments from natural theology and naturalism, because ambiguity quickly fades in the context of religious epistemology in Part Three.

With this in mind, in Part Two, “The Religious Ambiguity of the Universe,” Hick quickly dismisses the ontological, cosmological, teleological, moral, experiential, and probability arguments from natural theology as well as discusses the many strengths but ultimate limitations of various naturalistic options. To begin, he introduces “The Issue”:

By the religious ambiguity of the universe I do not mean that it has no definite character but that it is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways.... From the beginnings of human life... the reality of the transcendent was accepted as manifest fact.... Thus a religious understanding of the world, and religious modes of experiencing human life, flowed on through the generations almost without hindrance.

But with the western Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, stimulated by the rapid development of the modern scientific method and outlook, a skepticism that had hitherto hovered in the background as a mere logical possibility now became psychologically present and plausible within the more educated circles of Europe and North America, and the old religious certainties began to crumble.... And in this post-Enlightenment age of doubt we have realized that the universe is religiously ambiguous. It evokes and sustains non-religious as well as religious responses.²⁸

Therefore, he concludes:

That the world is today experienced both theistically and naturalistically or atheistically is an evident fact, not likely to be disputed by anyone. Dispute does however arise when we ask whether these different modes of experience are alike rationally defensible. For there are those who maintain that the existence, or the non-existence, of God can be established either as certain or at least as demonstrably more probable than the contrary. Accordingly the religious ambiguity of the universe, as permitting both theistic and naturalistic responses, is by no means universally accepted and the case for it has to be made by showing the inconclusiveness of the various philosophical arguments on both sides.²⁹

Ironically, Hick *does not* ultimately believe that these different modes of experience are alike rationally defensible and Hick is one of those who *does* maintain that the reality of religious experience establishes the Transcendent as certain or, at least, as demonstrably more probable than the contrary; which is the focus of Part Three. Nevertheless, on the one hand, Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis cannot use natural theology to validate the existence of his noumenal Real because it involves literal ontological specificity, and, on the other hand, he also cannot allow naturalism’s atheistic reductionism because it explains away all religion as a purely human

²⁸Hick, *Interpretation*, 73-74.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 74-75.

phenomenon. Thus, Hick endeavors to make a conclusive philosophical argument for the inconclusiveness of philosophical arguments that disagree with his Pluralistic Hypothesis; but since philosophical arguments are apparently open to error and/or overstatement, it only seems rational to question him as well. Unfortunately for Hick, Part Two is not so much a compelling case for perpetual philosophical inconclusiveness between theistic and atheistic arguments thus confirming the reality of the religious ambiguity of the universe—and justifying the need for his mediating pluralism—but is rather an extended illustration of presuppositionalism and the reality of intellectual freedom when evaluating the persuasiveness of evidence.

Before addressing any of the particulars of Hick’s argumentation in Part Two, it is important to note that presuppositions—whether held consciously or unconsciously—are unavoidable and, as such, there is nothing inherently negative or irrational about them. Furthermore, presuppositions act as an interpretive grid for individual narratives which—implicitly or explicitly—are joined together to form a meta-narrative about ultimate reality. Here again, there is nothing inherently negative or irrational about this normal process of thinking. Trouble may arise, however, when presuppositions cause one to involuntarily overlook or voluntarily exclude/reinterpret aspects of reality that do not fit one’s meta-narrative. This is where philosophical arguments about individual features of reality as well as comprehensive philosophical explanations of ultimate reality actually find their greatest utility. To be sure, philosophical inquiry is still heavily influenced by presuppositions so that multiple interpretations to the same data are possible, but, at least, the rules are set and the playing field is level when stepping into the arena of ideas.³⁰ Furthermore, multiple possible interpretations to the same data

³⁰What is set are the laws of logic, the correspondence theory of truth, and the structure of a sound proof. Regarding the first “rule,” a great number of academic books and scholarly journal articles have been written to show how logic does not serve as the foundation of all rational thought or how a particular law is not absolute and immutable; however, no matter how cleverly worded or illustrated, every argument against logic must itself consistently employ the law of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle or be discarded as propositionally meaningless. An excellent example is *The Law of Non-Contradiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), edited by Graham Priest, JC Beall, and Bradley Armour-Garb, where 23 contributors present their case for or against this law of logic. Using modal logic and paradoxes (e.g., “this sentence is false”), it is argued that a proposition can be: neither true nor false; only false; both true and false; or only true (see Part IV: Against the LNC). In response, it is argued that unnecessary “noise” is introduced into the modal logic examples and the paradoxes are actually “Catch-22” bi-conditional statements, not propositions which have truth value (see Part V: For the LNC). To be sure, logic is a negative test of truth—meaning, what is true must be logical but what is logical is not necessarily true—but anyone who denies the preeminence of logic in rational, meaningful argumentation ultimately produces only gibberish regardless of how elegantly or persuasively it may be articulated.

Concerning the second “rule” in the arena of ideas, a great number of academic books and scholarly journal articles have also been written to show how truth does not necessarily correspond to reality; specifically, “truth” is defined as “that which corresponds to reality.” Alternate theories such as pragmatism, coherence, and relativity have

does not indicate philosophical ambiguity or equity, but simply a disagreement on how one evaluates the persuasiveness of available evidence. Thus, when considering mutually exclusive meta-narratives of ultimate reality—such as atheism, theism, and pluralism—it is not surprising that the scale will shift one way or the other depending upon the interpreter.³¹ Also, to require anything close to an intellectually coercive proof to validate any proposition is an irrationally and impractically high standard of evidence; simply put, such a requirement cannot even meet its

been offered; however, no matter how cleverly worded or illustrated, every competing theory ultimately argues that it accurately describes the ontology of reality rather than simply being pragmatically true, coherently true, relatively true, etc. As such, a correspondence theory of truth simply cannot be avoided. An academic introduction to the subject is Andrew Newman's *The Correspondence Theory of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), but in their popular-level book *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino summarize the nature of truth as: Non-contradictory, it does not violate the basic laws of logic; Absolute, it does not depend upon any time, place, or condition; Discovered, it exists independently of our minds so we do not create it; Descriptive, it is the agreement of the mind with reality; Inescapable, to deny its existence is to affirm it so we are bound by it; and Unchanging, it is the firm standard by which propositional claims are measured (p. 52). Therefore, to deny the existence of truth or its correspondence to reality is logically self-refuting and practically self-defeating.

Regarding the third “rule,” in his chapter titled “On Proving That God Exists,” Ronald Nash explains that a proof is simply an argument, and “In order for an argument to be sound, the argument must be [formally] valid, and the propositions that make up the argument must be true. . . . Note that these characteristics are really independent of psychological or personal factors such as whether an individual’s personal history predisposes him to view the arguments favorably or unfavorably” (108). Nevertheless, he notes that proofs are still person-relative. Meaning:

(1) *Proofs are relative*, which is simply to admit the obvious, namely, that the same argument may function as a proof for one person and result in little more than contempt from someone else. (2) *Proofs are relative to individual persons*. Even when an argument is directed to some large audience, the people in that audience must always respond as individuals. And their responses will reflect varying features in their past and present personal history. [109]

In other words, a “good” proof (i.e., persuasive) must pass both a logical and psychological test, but despite the objectivity of the former, the subjectivity of the latter may cause a person to—among other things—doubt a premise, question an inference, or reject a conclusion (110-13). Therefore, a rationally justified philosophical belief requires some intellectual rigor and playing by the rules but no philosophical proof rests on an unquestionable premise; and, even if it did, it would still not stop people from questioning it (113-16). [*Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1988.]

Finally, Hick fully understands the importance of these three “rules of the game” and in his philosophy of religion, implicitly and explicitly, he tries to show that he is playing by them; an example of the latter is his devotion of an entire chapter in his book to “The Problem of Conflicting Truth-Claims” (ch. 20). Simply put, Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis is his attempt at a logically and psychologically convincing proof that, he contends, actually corresponds to reality (i.e., true). With this in mind, Hick first thinks he can exorcise all the demons of logical contradiction from the world’s religions by introducing a bifurcation between the noumenal Real and phenomenal experience as well as a bifurcation between mythical truth and literal truth. Second, he uses hand-picked examples from and creative explanations of various religious doctrines and practices to bolster its psychological persuasiveness. Finally, Hick argues that his philosophy of religion is true because it corresponds to reality. Unfortunately, while his Pluralistic Hypothesis may be psychologically persuasive and philosophically comprehensive, because there are logical inconsistencies present, one may question the truth of Hick’s system.

³¹Hick explicitly attests to this fact in the conclusion of Part Two (pp. 122-24), however, he fails to mention that by not weighting the evidence stronger for or against atheism or theism, he is actually weighing the evidence in favor of his version of pluralism. Simply put, Hick is not as presuppositionally neutral in his analysis of the validity and strength of naturalism and natural theology as he would seem to indicate in his book.

own standard. Finally, regarding an argument's persuasiveness, Douglas Geivett and Ronald Nash provide succinct commentary: "It is always possible to resist the persuasive effect of a philosophical argument;" and "While many perfectly good arguments fail to persuade large numbers of people, many perfectly bad arguments persuade people by the millions."³²

Consequently—returning to Hick's case for the inconclusiveness of the various philosophical arguments from natural theology and naturalism—it is important to assess Part Two in the context of Hick's presuppositions and take into account his weighting of the evidence. To be sure, this does not automatically mean he is wrong, but it does allow for blind spots and biases. Thus, regarding natural theology, it is quite plausible that Hick's rejection of its validity as convincing proof for the existence and nature of the Divine is connected as much to his Pluralistic Hypothesis as it is to any actual philosophical limitations of a particular argument. As already noted, if any proof from natural theology is deemed valid, then Hick's entire Pluralistic Hypothesis fails because something positive can be literally known of the Transcendent; thus making the ineffable noumenal Real no longer ineffable. Nevertheless, even before his mature philosophy of religion explicitly included the Pluralistic Hypothesis, Hick discounted the validity of natural theology as evidenced by his negative evaluation of it in the last chapter of his book *Arguments for the Existence of God* published in 1971:

We have seen that the major theistic arguments are all open to serious philosophical objections. Indeed we have in each case concluded, in agreement with the majority of contemporary philosophers, that these arguments fail to do what they profess to do. Neither those which undertake strictly to demonstrate the existence of an absolute Being, nor those which profess to show divine existence to be probable, are able to fulfil their promise. We have seen that it is impossible to demonstrate the reality of God by *a priori* reasoning, since such reasoning is confined to the realm of concepts; impossible to demonstrate it by *a posteriori* reasoning, since this would have to include a premise begging the very question at issue; and impossible to establish it as in a greater or lesser degree probable, since the notion of probability lacks any clear meaning in this context.³³

I could not disagree more with Hick's evaluation, but, unfortunately, due to the parameters of this paper, thorough critical analysis of Hick's dismissal of the best philosophical arguments

³²Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick's Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 56, and Ronald Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 109.

³³John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 101.

from the best religious and scientific minds spanning the past thousand years is not possible.³⁴ It is, however, interesting to note that despite being a “metaphysical Transcendentalist,” Hick’s dismissive evaluations of natural theology essentially mirrors that of an atheist,³⁵ but once he has used naturalism against natural theology, he simply dismisses atheism’s non-realist view of religious experience as overly reductionistic and moves forward with the reality of religious

³⁴An excellent introduction to scholarly debate of the classical arguments of natural theology for God’s existence and nature is Brian Davies’ *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2000. It contains seminal excerpts from pioneering Christian theologians and philosophers such as Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, William Paley, and Rene Descartes as well as contemporary Christian theologians and philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Thomas Morris, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Paul Helm. On the other hand, it also contains critical reviews of each classical theistic argument by influential skeptics and atheists such as W.K. Clifford, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Anthony Flew, A.J. Ayer, J.L. Mackie, and Kai Nielsen. A second similar resource is *Debating Christian Theism* edited by J.P. Moreland, Chad Meister, and Khaldoun Sweis (New York: Oxford University Press), 2013. The first twenty chapters consist of 10 theistic arguments for God’s existence drawn from natural theology and 10 atheistic criticisms of each argument. As an aside, the second twenty chapters debate specific Christian beliefs in the same back-and-forth format; Richard Swinburne argues for an orthodox understanding of the atonement while John Hick argues against it.

While Hick is not specifically known for his rigorous academic work on the expansive topic of natural theology, he has published several books and journal articles that deal with it directly as well as various other books and journal articles that deal with it indirectly. However, when the totality of Hick’s negative view of natural theology is compared to the positive case made for it in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012)—where every chapter is written by a scholar who has specifically devoted his academic energy to studying and defending God’s existence via natural theology—Hick’s arguments are shown to be short-sighted and biased, ironically, not only by scientific evidentialism but also by his religious pluralism. With regard to skepticism resulting from scientific evidentialism, the scholarly work *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, edited by James Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), specifically deconstructs Hume’s criticisms not only of natural theology in general but also of its specific arguments (e.g., cosmological, teleological, moral, experiential, consciousness, etc.). While more historical and polemical in its focus, Alister McGrath’s book *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), also makes a clear and compelling case for the validity of arguments from natural theology as evidence for the existence of God despite significant challenges from Darwinian evidentialistic claims of explanatory power, scope, and plausibility. Also, Alister McGrath’s book *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), indirectly challenges Hick’s interpretation of religion because McGrath’s book focuses on the human quest for the Transcendent, but argues that natural theology is a perfectly acceptable context for it. Another excellent resource is J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig’s book *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), which substantively addresses epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, ethics, and the existence and nature of God in arguments from natural theology; each individual chapter implicitly challenges the validity of Hick’s pluralistic philosophy of religion, but the book collectively presents a much stronger rational, philosophical, scientific, and religious meta-narrative regarding Ultimate Reality. Finally, Ronald Nash’s book *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), presents a cumulative case for the rational superiority of Christianity via epistemology and natural theology.

³⁵For example, compare Hick’s analysis of natural theology with the analysis of atheists such as David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Anthony Flew, William Rowe, Kai Nielsen, Michael Martin, Graham Oppy, and J. L. Mackie: David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Edited, with an Introduction, by Richard Popkin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 1998; J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1982; Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1990; Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2006; and Anthony Flew, *God & Philosophy* (Amherst: Prometheus Books), 2005.

experience and the rationality of religious belief—as seen in Part Three—and the bifurcation of the ineffable noumenal Real and religious phenomenal experiences—as seen in Part Four.

In Part Two, however, Hick is immediately concerned with arguing his presuppositional case for the religious ambiguity of the universe based on the inconclusiveness of the various philosophical arguments on both sides. Therefore, while he sounds very much like an atheist when discussing natural theology, he does allow for contingencies which challenge naturalism's complete hegemony. For example, Hick writes:

The negative arguments [of anti-theism], then, consist in the fact that it is possible to understand all the known phenomena in naturalistic terms. We have already seen that this is true of the evolution of the universe as a whole and of our ethical, cognitive, aesthetic and religious modes of experience. We are not obligated to postulate a transcendent divine Reality to account for any of these aspects of our nature or our environment. It is true that no naturalistic theory can account for the *existence* of the universe, or for its having the basic character that it has; this simply has to be accepted as the ultimate inexplicable fact. But religion also has its own ultimate inexplicable fact in the form of God or a non-personal Absolute.³⁶

While it would be difficult to summarize completely and impartially the enormous corpus of historical and contemporary writing on arguments for and against the existence of the Divine, Hick's equity-in-ambiguity format is highly selective and purposefully designed to reinforce his stated case of philosophical inconclusiveness. This is not surprising, however, because Hick is not an impartial referee, his philosophical team is also on the same playing field striving for dominance. As such, he skillfully draws his readers away from the inconclusiveness and confusion of theism/atheism debates toward the clarity and inevitability of his Pluralistic Hypothesis, and the above statement is a perfect example of a consistent pattern. Specifically, Hick first makes a very strong statement in favor of atheism, which indicates a purely human origin of all religion. He then attaches a question mark caveat to the absolute explanatory power of naturalism, which opens the door to a metaphysical origin of religion; however, both sides are on equal footing as ultimate inexplicable facts. Finally, Hick subtly introduces the language of his Pluralistic Hypothesis when he allows the ultimate inexplicable metaphysical fact to be called either "God" or a "non-personal Absolute." In other words, he is anticipating Part Three, when naturalism's non-realist understanding of religious experience is rejected in favor of a realist understanding, and Part Four, where *personae* and *impersonae* are simply phenomenal

³⁶Hick, *Interpretation*, 111.

descriptions of the noumenal Real. Quite skillfully, then, Hick not only allows himself an escape hatch from naturalism's atheistic reductionism, but he also avoids natural theology's literal attribution of ontological specificity to the Divine.³⁷ Therefore, ironically, while Hick admonishes theists and atheists who maintain that the existence or non-existence of the Divine can be established as certain or, at least, as demonstrably more probable than the contrary, Hick ultimately presents his case as certain or, at least, demonstrably more probable than the contrary; and his entire case rests on the successful dismissal not only of natural theology's literal ontological descriptions of the Divine but also of naturalism's non-realist reductionism of religious experience.

Speaking of religious experience, Hick's statements regarding this particular argument from natural theology in Part Two needs to be examined because a very specific understanding of religious experience in Part Three acts as the linchpin of Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis in Part Four. With this in mind, what does Hick say in the context of the universe's religious ambiguity? First and foremost, he distinguishes between public and private religious experiences:

At the moment we are concerned with this as something from which it may or may not be possible to infer the existence of God—or, more broadly, the superior plausibility of a religious over a naturalistic interpretation of the universe. We are not at this point concerned with religious experience in the light of the very different part that it plays in the kind of natural theology to be developed in Chapter 13 [The Rationality of Religious

³⁷Another perfect example of this pattern occurs when Hick address the failure of the teleological argument from natural theology. Stating that “older versions of the argument were severely damaged by two successive blows. Hume's philosophical critique,” and, nearly a century later, “Darwin's demonstration that organic adaptation to environment results from a continuous process of natural selection.... which leaves no gap requiring to be filled by supernatural intervention” (81-82). Nevertheless, Hick is a “Transcendental pluralist,” not an atheist or a theist, so:

I shall argue presently that, if the question is whether from all this we can validly infer God, the answer has to be No. But if the question is whether, from a religious standpoint, the universe can properly be seen as a creation or emanation or expression of the divine, the answer has to be Yes. There are two broad alternative views of the relation between the material universe and the supposed transcendent Reality of which religion speaks. One is the naturalistic conception that the physical universe is prior and that ‘God’, the ‘Real’ and so on are ideas formed in the consciousness of human animals after some fifteen billion years during with no such thought existed, and are likely to persist for only a few more pulses of cosmic time; the other is the religious conception of the divine as ontologically prior and the physical universe is secondary and derivative. This religious option entails that the material universe, with its actual structure and history, stands in some kind of instrumental or expressive relationship to the divine: the fact that the universe exists and has the character that it has, including its liability to produce human life, is ultimately to be attributed to the divine Reality. [85-86]

Of course, in chapters 5-7, Hick is arguing for the religious ambiguity of the universe based on the philosophical inconclusiveness of the various arguments from both natural theology and naturalism, so his “on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand” type of presentation is to be expected; however, because Hick needs a metaphysical Transcendent for his Pluralistic Hypothesis to work, there is always a “middle way” open past the uncertainty of theism/atheism leading to the ineffable noumenal Real and phenomenal religious experiences of it, even if it is in the background.

Belief]. It will be useful to distinguish between on the one hand the religious experiencing, shared by a number of people, of public events, and on the other hand private experiences of inner religious encounter and illumination.³⁸

While a distinction can be made between the two, the question arises as to why Hick immediately divides public and private religious experiences and treats them as two entirely different categories in two completely different sections of his book. An obvious answer involves Hick's presuppositionalism and the desire not only to preserve his version of religious ambiguity here but also insulate his Pluralistic Hypothesis against any future ontological descriptions being literally attributed to the Divine via authentic religious experience. To insure this, Hick introduces the bifurcation of mythical and historical truth into his bifurcation of public and private religious experience.

To illustrate the legitimacy of his bifurcations, Hick examines two stories from the Judeo-Christian tradition; the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt and the resurrection of Jesus. Regarding the first, Hick explains:

In the case of the exodus the historian cannot at this temporal distance tell precisely what empirical events, capable in principle of having been recorded by camera and microphone, lie behind the religiously interpreted and elaborated story in the Hebrew Bible. The exodus appears in the narrative as a manifestly divinely enabled event.... But what historically-minded person today can regard this story as an accurate account of actual historical events? ...All we can safely say is that a group of Hebrew serfs successfully emigrated from Egypt and that they or their descendants ended up in Canaan, contributing to Jewish folk memory the story of how their God had delivered them from captivity.³⁹

He continues:

Their particular story became, through a process of natural selection, central to Jewish self-understanding. But when Jews today dwell upon, 'remember', 'experience', 'participate in' the exodus as a great act of divine deliverance they are not experiencing the actual historical events of some thirty centuries ago. They are participating in something contemporary—a living tradition, one strand of which is the foundational myth of a deliverance that revealed God's providential care for their race. That the myth is a true myth, evoking an appropriate response of trust in God, does not entail that the traditional story is literally true.⁴⁰

Therefore, Hick concludes:

It follows from this distinction between a now inaccessible fragment of history and the religious myth that has been built around it that someone who does not share the response embodied in the myth, acknowledging instead only the minimal core of historical fact, is not

³⁸Hick, *Interpretation*, 99.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 99-100.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 100.

obliged to see the hand of God at work here.... On this interpretation the event itself recedes into the twilight between history and pre-history. It cannot be offered as an unquestionable public divine manifestation.⁴¹

Setting aside for the moment that Hick shares David Hume's biased scientific evidentialism and naturalistic skepticism of miracles⁴² as well as confesses a post-modern, post-Christian, Western, socially-liberal theology,⁴³ Hick interprets the Hebrew exodus as a mythical public religious experience with only pragmatic soteriological value; which is not surprising because if this narrative was literally, historically true then it would reveal a great deal about the ontological nature of the Divine as testified to by multiple people simultaneously. Simply put, it would contradict Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis. Therefore, Hick suggests, a small fragment of history, over time, became integral folklore for Hebrew self-identity by retrospectively attesting that the Jews are God's specially chosen people.

Nevertheless, even if miraculous public events could be historically authenticated, Hick would still relegate them to mythical phenomenal experiences revealing absolutely nothing about the ineffable noumenal Real; which is exactly what he does with the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

In Christian tradition the resurrection was a public event in the sense that some of the encounters with the risen lord were group experiences—not only of the apostles but of more than five hundred of Jesus' followers on one occasion (1 Cor. 15:16).... It figures in the Christian tradition as an event within publically observable history and with the indelibly miraculous character of God's raising of his son from the dead. And yet modern histories of the Roman Empire, written in accordance with the accepted canons of historical research, include no such manifest miracle.... The detailed evidence in the Christian writings themselves—and there is no other first-century references—is too conflicting, and shows too

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Since Hick passed away in 2012, he probably never read Craig Keener's two-volume work *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 2011. Specifically, chapters 4-6 comprehensively deconstruct Hume's skeptical argument against miracles, but even if Hick had read this or any other conservative evangelical apologetic not only for imminent Divine involvement but also for the New Testament's version of it, he most likely would have relegated the entire book to mythical commentary on phenomenal religious experiences.

Also, for chapter-length deconstructions of naturalistic scientific evidentialism, read: J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "Philosophy and the Integration of Science and Theology," in *Philosophical Foundations*, 346-66, and Ronald Nash, "The Evidentialist Challenge to Religious Belief," in *Faith & Reason*, 69-78. For book-length deconstructions of naturalistic scientific evidentialism, read: Michael Rea, *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2002, and Robert Koons and George Bealer, eds., *The Waning of Materialism* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2010.

⁴³This fact is clearly established by Hick's mythical interpretation of the deity of Jesus Christ, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, and the inspiration of the Bible. Furthermore, mythically interpreting the Genesis account of the creation narrative, the origin of humans, and the origin of sin (p. xxxix), Hick affirms Darwinian evolution (p. 82) and humanistic morality (p. 97). Finally, Hick's understanding of salvation/liberation (ch. 3 & 17) and cosmic eschatological optimism (ch. 4) is post-modern, Western, socially-liberal, humanistic utopianism, not orthodox Christianity.

many signs of a miraculous heightening in successive strata of the tradition, for the historian to be able to affirm with the scriptures that Jesus, having died on the cross, was raised again to bodily life on the third day.⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, what follows is a snapshot naturalistic compendium of possible explanations including later theological development, adaptation from other traditions, spiritual visions, and communicable hallucinations. Therefore, sounding very much like liberal New Testament scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, Hick concludes:

we do not have an instance, acceptable by normal historical canons, of a publically observed divine action. The original resurrection event is inaccessible to us, and the Christian response to it through the centuries has been to a gripping pictorial image and a powerful theological idea, a response that terminates for some in the private experience, whether enjoyed in solitude or amidst a worshipping congregation.... But this contemporary resurrection experience does not depend upon the literary historicity of any particular element of the biblical narratives.⁴⁵

Here again, I could not disagree more with Hick's evaluation of the historical evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus based on the New Testament's witness and its seminal importance to Christianity, but, again, the parameters of this paper do not permit a comprehensive rebuttal.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Hick, *Interpretation*, 101.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 102-03.

⁴⁶If blasphemy within Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis consists of attributing positive ontological properties to the noumenal Real and holding an exclusivistic view of salvation, then orthodox Christianity must be the most blasphemous religion possible considering it not only teaches that an absolute, omnipotent, omniscient, personal, holy, just, loving, perfect, triune God specifically became incarnate to better reveal Himself to humans and provide the only way of salvation from the reality of sin and eternal separation, but also that humans are created in the image of God; both points effectively dissolve Hick's noumenal-phenomenal divide. Such depth and richness of specificity regarding God's nature and God's actions while claiming historical authenticity surely offends Hick's pluralistic sensibilities, and he is rescued only by clinging to his presupposition that it is all just a mythical, pragmatic tradition.

One point that Ronald Nash emphasizes in his book *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* when reviewing Hick's pluralistic interpretation of the Bible is the absence of references to reputable New Testament scholars. Since Hick passed away in 2012, it does little good to recommend a reading list, but each of the following resources substantively challenges Hick's mythical reinterpretations of the New Testament: Craig Bloomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity), 2007; Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity), 2006; Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for The Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press), 1996; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins), 1996; Craig Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans), 2012; Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel), 2004; Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity), 2010; Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1995; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1992; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1996; N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2003.

While obviously possible, those who reject or explain away the wealth of available encyclopedic evidence from primary and secondary sources are either completely closed to it beforehand (e.g., an atheist) or have a competing religious meta-narrative (e.g., Hick's pluralism). Regarding the latter, it is interesting to juxtapose Hick's

Hick's point, however, is clear: Public religious experiences do not serve as sufficient evidence to conclusively argue for either the existence or the ontological nature of the Divine; not only is a purely naturalistic explanation for the rise of this Christian tradition possible but it also does not meet "modern" historical standards of proof. Thus, according to Hick, the universe remains stubbornly ambiguous due to the inconclusive philosophical arguments from theism and atheism regarding public religious experiences, compliments of his presuppositions and bifurcations.

When concluding this section and looking forward to the next, it is somewhat ironic that private religious experience will most assuredly not be ambiguous in the epistemological context of the rationality of religious belief, and, consequently, the universe will not remain stubbornly ambiguous; for Hick, it is unquestionably inhabited by an ultimate divine Reality which serves as the ground for all culture-relative phenomenal religious expressions. To be sure, this noumenal Real is ineffable so no positive ontological descriptions can be made of it, but even this enigmatic reality fundamentally dissolves religious ambiguity where it matters most. Meaning, naturalism, as a meta-narrative, fails. Hick, of course, continues to admit the logical possibility of naturalism, but argues for a critical religious realism which allows for the literal existence of a transcendent Reality. On the other hand, despite advocating for the existence of a divine Reality, Hick rejects philosophical arguments from natural theology and reinterprets religious descriptions of the Real as mythically true and pragmatically soteriological. Therefore, Hick—who is not a neutral bystander but rather an active participant in the arena of ideas—presuppositionally constructs, with the help of arbitrary bifurcations, the religious ambiguity of the universe based on the philosophical inconclusiveness of atheism and theism; which is designed to lead to a crisis of belief that is only satisfactorily resolved by Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is the thesis of this paper that Hick's inconsistencies between his argument for religious ambiguity and his argument for religious epistemology act as detractors from rather than support for his Pluralistic Hypothesis. The details of Hick's religious epistemology will now be examined.

The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2005, with a book written by a former student of Hick's, David Nah, *Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism: A Critical Evaluation of John Hick* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock), 2012. Contrary to Hick's "evolved" understanding of Christianity, it is inaccurate to accuse the New Testament's writers and early Church's interpreters of not only historical revisions and additions but also doctrinal invention and illogicality (e.g., hypostatic union and Trinity). Nevertheless, the full force of New Testament truth is only experienced by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. As such, "philosophy" and "religion" are inadequate descriptions of Christianity because it is first and foremost about a restored personal relationship with the Almighty; actively worshiping the Creator according to His inspired, self-revelation in the Bible.

III. HICK'S RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY: COGNITIVE FREEDOM OR EXPERIENTIAL COERCION

In Part Three, "Epistemological," Hick argues for cognitive freedom in religious meaning and experience, the reality of religious experience, and the rationality of religious belief. Ironically, the philosophical force of Hick's religious ambiguity continually allows for doubt to creep into his own religious epistemology. Thus, even though he presents an eloquent case over the course of six chapters, in the end, he acknowledges that even if religious belief is rational, whether or not one finds meaning in religious experience is largely the result of one's prior commitments (i.e., presuppositions). With this in mind, Hick begins his argument for cognitive freedom in religious meaning and experience (ch. 10) by first examining its place in natural meaning and experience (ch. 8) and ethical meaning and experience (ch. 9). Once this epistemological foundation is laid, he addresses religious realism (ch. 11) and religious non-realism (ch. 12); which examines whether there is an objective Referent to religious language or it is a purely human invention. Hick's commentary on contemporary non-realist religion is revealing because it makes a subtle transition from cognitive freedom to experiential coercion, where even atheist movements fall under his family-resemblance umbrella of a religion. Interestingly, then, Hick essentially classifies communism, for example, as a crypto-religion. Put another way, not only can all explicitly religious movement be subsumed under Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis, but also every explicitly anti-religious political, social, or economic "liberation" movement; supposedly because they are all helping transform people from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. As such, the Real cannot be escaped, and cognitive freedom is turned into experiential coercion, even if it is unconscious. In the final chapter, however, Hick mutes his coercive overtones and simply argues for the rationality of religious belief (ch. 13) based on a Parity Argument, which utilizes the epistemological foundation laid in his first chapter on natural meaning and experience.

First and foremost, before anything productive can be done in developing a religious epistemology, Hick must escape the gravitational pull of a religiously ambiguous universe. To do so, he transitions from ambiguous philosophical speculation to actual meaningful experience:

We have seen that the universe, as presently accessible to us, is religiously ambiguous in that it is capable of being interpreted intellectually and experientially in both religious and naturalistic ways. Even when it has come to be understood, experienced and inhabited in a particular way, whether religious or non-religious, it still retains its ambiguity for the intellect. And so, ideally, the religious person should, even whilst experiencing and living in

the world religiously, be able to acknowledge its theoretically equivocal character; and the same holds *vice versa* for the non-religious person. However we are now leaving that philosophical ambiguity behind and turning to the ways in which the world is actually experienced and responded to. For whilst the objective ambiguity of our environment consists in the fact that it is *capable* of being interpreted in a variety of ways, its consciously experienced and actively lived-in character consists in its *actually being* interpreted as meaningful in a particular way which, whilst it operates, excludes other possible ways.⁴⁷

While a common element of epistemological discourse is to state the obvious—or, in other words, make explicit what is implicit in the discipline of thinking about thinking—in order use it as a principlizing bridge to the next stage in a rational argument, Hick’s transition actually introduces an unnecessary tension rather than just highlighting the difference between thinking about reality and living in reality. Simply put, Hick’s bifurcation is arbitrary. Unless one is completely convinced by Hick’s presuppositional argument in Part Two, one need not segregate intellectual ambiguity from inhabited actuality when interpreting the meaning of reality. According to Hick, however, it appears as though philosophy of religion is in an entirely different category completely separated from conscious experience because the former is objectively theoretical while the latter is exclusivistically actual; which makes one wonder why Hick is a philosopher of religion and not simply a mystic.

Even though there is an inherently theoretical quality to philosophical contemplation which provides endless fuel for intellectual debate, Geivett points out in his book *Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick’s Theodicy*, that “the God of the philosophers is more than a mere abstraction. Theistic arguments are constructed by natural theologians as positively evincing the concrete existence of God, not just the conceptual coherence of the idea of God.”⁴⁸ Therefore, aside from Hick’s arbitrary bifurcations in his Pluralistic Hypothesis between the noumenal Real and phenomenal experience and mythical truth and literal truth, why not, Geivett asks, “accept the view that identity holds between the God of religious awareness and the God of philosophical inquiry.... What is to prevent us, as rational persons, from bringing our interpretation of experience into conformity with the concept of God at the end of... a truly successful argument for the existence of God?”⁴⁹ Furthermore, he explains, “the God of

⁴⁷Hick, *Interpretation*, 129.

⁴⁸Douglas Geivett. *Evil and the Evidence for God: The Challenge of John Hick’s Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 51-52.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 52-53.

philosophy is the God of *some* experience by virtue of being the result of philosophical inquiry, which is a mode of experience;” meaning, “No argument for the existence of God, however abstract, is effected in total abstraction from human experience.”⁵⁰ Finally, Geivett concludes, while “Philosophical inquiry sometimes attests to and sometimes disconfirms what the religious believer thinks may be predicable about God based on religious experience, the data of experience will always be relevant to philosophical judgments about the existence and nature of God,” and, similarly, philosophical judgments about the existence and nature of God will always be relevant to the data of experience.⁵¹

Of course, Part Two of Hick’s book makes clear that he does not find any argument from natural theology to be successful, but the bifurcation is still arbitrary. So, again, unless a person finds Hick’s presuppositional Pluralistic Hypothesis for an ineffable noumenal Real persuasive, it is not rationally or practically necessary to separate philosophical speculation about the Divine from actual experiences of the Divine; and, if the two can be harmonized across multiple cultures in the lives of multiple people, it acts as a strong proof for a particular understanding of Ultimate Reality. The problem for Hick, however, is that he sees all religions as possessing equal soteriological value (ch. 2) and having equal eschatological optimism (ch. 4), so he can only logically harmonize their disparate authentic religious experiences under the bifurcated rubric of his Pluralistic Hypothesis (ch. 14). Unfortunately, the price for doing so is the devaluation of not only philosophical arguments but also religious experience. Obviously, Hick does not reject philosophical speculation as an intellectual discipline, since he devoted his life to it, he just rejects any ontological specificity attributed to Ultimate Reality that results from philosophical arguments and religious experiences. Therefore, on the one hand, Hick completely agrees that pervasive religious experience does speak to the ultimate nature of reality, but, on the other hand, he disagrees that the conscious interpretation of the religious experiences themselves provide literal meaning about the ultimate nature of reality. It is somewhat ironic, then, that while presenting a complex epistemological argument based on the reality of religious experience and rationality of religious belief in order to meaningfully progress beyond the objective philosophical ambiguity of the universe, Hick rejects the content of the religious experience as valid evidence for the Divine. Nevertheless, rather than bifurcate intellectual philosophical

⁵⁰Ibid., 53.

⁵¹Ibid., 54.

inquiry and actual religious experience, one should continually engage them in substantive dialogue when interpreting the meaning of reality.

While Hick's epistemology of religious belief is predicated upon an arbitrary bifurcation, it does not mean that his entire argument is similarly arbitrary. As a matter of fact, for a religious believer, there is substantive value to Hick's development of epistemology; which, in many ways, parallels the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga.⁵² The main difference between the two regarding properly basic beliefs and the rationality of religious experience is that, as a Christian, Plantinga argues God revealed in Jesus Christ as ultimate while Hick, as a Kantian categorical pluralist, argues for the noumenal Real as ultimate. In other words, there is not a disagreement on the fundamental importance of religious experience but on its application to Ultimate Reality. With this in mind, Hick addresses the reality of religious experience and the rationality of religious belief by first defining meaning and then describing its three levels. Accordingly, Hick begins by explaining that "meaning is the most general characteristic of conscious experience. For to be conscious is, normally, to be discriminatingly aware of various features of our surroundings in such a way that we can act appropriately in relation to them."⁵³ Specifically, he continues, humans do not find themselves, on the one hand, in a homogeneous continuum without differentiation or, on the other hand, in a chaotic cacophony with nothing but differentiation, "but rather in a structured environment within which we can react differently to different items and within diverse situations.... such that we learn, with greater or less success, to behave appropriately in relation to them."⁵⁴ Consequently, Hick asserts, "To be sane, or basically rational, is to live in terms of the perceived character of our environment. And for that environment to have meaning for us is for it to be such that we can conduct ourselves within it in ways which we take to be appropriate to its character." "Meaning" he concludes, "is both a relational and a practical concept," it is "a pervasive characteristic of our environment as we perceive and inhabit it."⁵⁵ Experience, then, is a complex fabric woven from consciousness, meaning, environment, and behavior.

⁵²For a specific example, read Hick, *Interpretation*, p. 214, and his end note on p. 229.

See also, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame), 1983. This is a collection of eight essays by reformed epistemologists.

⁵³Hick, *Interpretation*, 130.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 130-31.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 131.

With this in mind, Hick focuses on three distinct levels of meaning that can inhabit the same reality, each of which possess a limiting boundary of cognitive freedom that renders responses appropriate or inappropriate. He explains:

In terms of *natural meaning* we inhabit the physical world, moving about in it as animal organisms. In terms of *ethical meaning* we inhabit this same world as an environment mediating personal relationships and moral claims. And in terms of *religious meaning* we inhabit this same world again, with both its physical and its ethical significance, as an environment either mediating or manifesting the ultimately Real. Thus meaning, as the perceived character of an aspect of our environment which renders a particular type of response appropriate, occurs at various levels.... And at each level of awareness, we exercise a cognitive freedom which is at its minimum in relation to the immediate physical environment and at its maximum in relation to that ultimate environment of which the religions speak.⁵⁶

Hick begins his detailed commentary on these three levels with “Natural Meaning and Experience” (ch. 8). Using this level as the conceptual foundation for the other two, Hick addressing the epistemological correlation between internal perceptions of external objects using the example of sensory information generated by sight:

The three-dimensional world of objects reflects light which affects the retina of the eye, stimulating its light-sensitive cells in patterns which correspond in some way to that which is affecting them. Thus the three dimensions of the physical world are projected onto the two dimensions of the more or less plane surface of the retina. Here changes in the rods and cones are converted into electrical impulses which travel along the million or so fibers of the optic nerve to the *area striata* at the back of the brain.... then mysteriously converted into the contents of consciousness.⁵⁷

Voicing a question as old as the exercise of epistemology itself, Hick asks:

But is the external world in fact reconstituted faithfully as the world of which we are aware, or is this latter a new and private creation, occurring only within our own field of consciousness? Since we can never experience the unexperienced we can never compare the world as it appears in consciousness with the postulated world as it exists independently of its impact upon our human sensory and nervous systems.... But that aspect of the world which is our consciousness of other parts of the world seems to be connected in regular ways with those other parts. For on the basis of the private inner ‘picture’ of itself which our environment creates in us we are able, by and large, to live successfully within it.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid., 132 (italics added).

⁵⁷Ibid., 134.

⁵⁸Ibid., 134-35.

Simply put, there is no logical or empirical way to prove correlation between one's internal consciousness and the external world, but to behave in any other way would be self-destructive both physically and psychologically.

Consequently, there are several significant conclusions Hick draws from this understanding of natural meaning and experience: First, "it is clear that the world as we perceive and inhabit it is not the world in its virtually infinite richness and complexity, but only a humanly selected aspect of it... [we are] attuned only to a minute proportion of the total range of information flowing through and around us."⁵⁹ Furthermore, "the environment in which we are conscious of living always transcends the physical impacts of the world upon our sense organs. Accordingly we cannot avoid the idea of the transcendent: for meaning is always couched at least partly in terms that exceed the immediately given."⁶⁰ Finally:

If our perceptual machinery were to go wrong we would quickly be set at odds with the surrounding world, misperceiving it and attempting to live on the basis of false assumptions concerning its character. In what would soon become a fatal encounter the larger system would inevitably prevail and we should be eliminated. Thus at this level our cognitive freedom is minimal; the physical world compels us to interpret its signals correctly and to live in it in terms of its real meaning for beings such as ourselves.⁶¹

Therefore, Hick has laid a foundation for meaning and experience which explicitly emphasizes: (1) basic correspondence between one's internal consciousness and external environments; (2) one's internal consciousness of external environments being limited/influenced by human categories and ideas; (3) the information present in the external environment exceeds one's internal consciousness of it; (4) and the ability of external environments to impose themselves on one's internal consciousness in the stratified context of cognitive freedom. To be sure, the significance or prominence of any one or all of these points will vary from situation to situation, but, again, they serve as the starting point for Hick's epistemology of meaning and experience.

With natural meaning and experience serving as the conceptual foundation for his epistemology, Hick moves to the next level, "Ethical and Aesthetic Meaning and Experience" (ch. 9). Not surprisingly, there are many similarities, but at this next level of meaning cognitive freedom is less restricted because situations exceed the sum of their constituent parts; for

⁵⁹Ibid., 135.

⁶⁰Ibid., 136.

⁶¹Ibid., 136-37.

example, Hick states, “in many situations we are responding not only to physical objects and a physical environment but at the same time to other persons and a social environment.”⁶² Put another way, in the presence of additional consciousnesses, there is not only intra-personal but also inter-personal information active in the environment to which one appropriately or inappropriately responds. Furthermore, what functions as “proper” or “improper” ethical behavior in a social setting—or aesthetically “pleasing” or “displeasing”—will largely be determined by the similarity or dissimilarity between the total number of personal and cultural categories and ideas present. Thus, Hick concludes, there is “for us a much greater freedom in relation to the ethical than to the natural meaning of the situations in which from moment to moment we find ourselves. For whilst a physical state of affairs imposes its character upon us, a moral state of affairs has to await our free recognition.”⁶³ For example, a rock climber cannot ignore gravity bearing down upon his body without great peril to himself; however the same rock climber can ignore feelings of guilt bearing down upon his mind for cheating on his wife.

Just as this epistemological pattern has operated in one’s response to his or her physical environment and one’s response to his or her social environment, it similarly operates in one’s response to his or her transcendent environment. In “Religious Meaning and Experience” (ch. 10), Hick explains why a person’s cognitive freedom is at its highest level. To begin with, regarding faith as the exercise of cognitive freedom, Hick understands “religious faith” as “that uncompelled subjective contribution to conscious experience which is responsible for its distinctly religious character. This is continuous with the subjective contribution to our ordinary awareness of our environment as having this or that kind of physical meaning, and of inter-personal situations as having this or that kind of ethical meaning.”⁶⁴ However, he continues, “at the religious level we have a much more comprehensive capacity to shut out of our consciousness that which we are not ready to face. We are in fact able to exclude the entire religious dimension, experiencing only such forms of meaning as can enter through the filter of a naturalistic world-view.”⁶⁵ On the other hand, “This greater cognitive freedom at the religious level is correlated with the greater claim upon us of the aspect of reality in question. For the Real

⁶²Ibid., 144.

⁶³Ibid., 151.

⁶⁴Ibid., 160-61.

⁶⁵Ibid., 161.

is the ultimate ground not only of the human life that has generated our moral categories but also of the religious invitation or claim or challenge to a radical self-transcendence;” which, Hick contends, “is always profoundly threatening to our ordinary consciousness.”⁶⁶ Paradoxically, then, Hick notes how religion not only acts as a cognitive filter impeding certain types of experiences that would threaten to overwhelm one’s consciousness, but also acts as the explicit category facilitating certain types of experiences that open one’s consciousness to the Real.⁶⁷

Hick’s next issue, “Religion and Reality” (ch. 11), revolves around whether or not religion “is to be regarded simply as a human creation or as our response to a transcendent reality.”⁶⁸ In other words, which corresponds to reality, religious realism or religious non-realism? Always helpful in defining his terms, Hick explains, “In modern epistemology realism is the view that material objects exist outside us and independently of what we take to be our perceptions of them,” thus, by analogy:

religious realism is the view that the objects of religious belief exist independently of what we take to be our human experience of them. For each religious tradition refers to something that stands transcendingly above or undergirdingly beneath and giving meaning for value to our existence.... these point to something alleged to be more or other than our ordinary human existence, something that is thus, in relation to us, transcendent. And what I am calling the realist option understands such language in a basically realist way as referring to an object of discourse that is ‘there’ to be referred to.⁶⁹

On the other hand, he continues, “a range of non-realist and anti-realist theories deny that religious language should be interpreted realistically.”⁷⁰ Put another way, “God-talk” is ultimately meaningless because there is nothing there as an objective referent, only linguistic

⁶⁶Ibid., 161-62.

⁶⁷Hick clarifies:

In the face of this threatening and promising, promising and threatening message of the religions we have a dual capacity to allow the Real to become present to us as the all-transforming reality or to shut it out of our consciousness. On the one hand, in so far as we are in our deepest dispositional nature open and responsive to the Real, we can receive an authentic awareness of it in one (or more) of its manifestations... the interpretive element within religious experience that enables us to enter into an unimpelled, though always necessarily limited and mediated, awareness of the Real.

On the other hand this cognitive freedom in relation to the Real also has a negative function, namely to protect our finite freedom and autonomy. For to be a particular kind of creature is to be structured to cognize and participate in reality in a particular way; and for a creature to have imposed upon it a more extensive or intensive awareness than it is able to assimilate, compulsorily revealing to it a more complex or more value-laden environment than it can respond to, would be destructive. [162]

⁶⁸Ibid., 172.

⁶⁹Ibid., 172-73.

⁷⁰Ibid., 175.

symbols pointing to ideas in the consciousness of human minds; ideas which are forever trapped within their culture-relative linguistic contexts.⁷¹ To this, Hick responds by noting:

we have already recognized the unavoidable element of interpretation within all conscious experience. Our awareness of the world is necessarily an awareness of it as it impinges upon us and becomes meaningfully organized in our consciousness. All awareness, whether of our more immediate or of our more ultimate environment, is accordingly formed in terms of conceptual systems embodied in the language of particular societies and traditions. We can therefore only experience the Real as its presence affects our distinctively human modes of consciousness, varying as these do in their apperceptive resources and habits from culture to culture and from individual to individual.⁷²

Therefore, he concludes, “whilst fully recognizing this human contribution, critical realism holds that the realm of religious experience and belief is not *in toto* human projection and illusion but constitutes a range of cognitive responses... to the presence of a transcendent reality or realities.”⁷³

Hick devotes his next chapter to rejecting “Contemporary Non-Realist Religion” (ch. 12) because it is reductionistic. Specifically, naturalism, as a meta-narrative, reduces all religious experience to some purely human phenomena because no objective Transcendent actually exists. Due to Hick’s position of religious realism and “transcendentalism,” such reductionism is an invalid interpretation of religious experience. Earlier in his book, Hick had already dismissed Sigmund Freud’s hostile psychological reductionism—religion as psychosis—and Emile Durkheim’s amiable sociological reductionism—religion as social cohesion⁷⁴—and here he adds to the list Ludwig Feuerback’s reductionism of God to human projections of ideals, R. B. Braithwaite’s reductionism of religious statements to moral statements, John Herman Randall’s reductionism of supernatural symbols to natural realities, D. Z. Phillips’s Wittgensteinian

⁷¹See “Part I: Philosophy and Religious Belief” and “Part II: The problem of God-Talk,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, by Brian Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17-171. These twelve chapters provide arguments for and against the rationality of religious belief as well as issues involved in speaking about God meaningfully.

A second excellent resource is Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, eds., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Paternoster), 2005. While an explicitly Christian book focusing on apologetic methodology, it explains the various aspects of classical apologetics, evidentialist apologetics, reformed apologetics, fideist apologetics, and integrative approach apologetics. Each approach is based on a specific epistemology, though, to be sure, each one begins with an understanding that “God-Talk” is literally meaningful. Nevertheless, Christianity is not a monolithic system of thought, so understanding the different epistemological approaches within it is beneficial whether interacting with Christians or non-Christians.

⁷²Hick, *Interpretation*, 173.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 175.

⁷⁴See pp. 111-18. For a more comprehensive review of these two positions, see Daniel Pals, “Religion and Personality: Sigmund Freud,” and “Society as Sacred: Emile Durkheim,” in *Eight Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53-117.

reductionism of religion to linguistic word-games, and Don Cupitt's reductionism of spirituality to individual pragmatism.

Therefore, on the one hand, in Part Two, Hick zealously defends an objectively ambiguous universe, where all philosophical arguments from both natural theology and naturalism exist in perpetual incompleteness, so that meaningful conclusions regarding ultimate reality cannot be drawn from either theistic or atheistic interpretations of experience; from philosophical argumentation alone, one is not more certain or more probable than the other, so because theism is logically possible, atheism cannot claim rational victory, but because atheism is also logically possible, theism cannot claim rational victory either. On the other hand, in Part Three, Hick even more zealously defends the ultimate existence of a metaphysical Transcendent based on the reality of religious experience and the rationality of religious belief; from a world actually, actively, immediately, and consciously understood, inhabited, interpreted, and experienced as meaningfully religious by so many people across so many cultures and so many millennia of human history, the Real *is* more certain and more probable because it *is* the noumenal Ultimate Reality of which all phenomenal religious experiences reflect. For Hick, this is not an epistemology of possibility but of certainty, not philosophical ambiguity but experiential actuality. In other words, while quite amiable to naturalism in Part Two, in Part Three it is absolutely rejected an insufficient worldview.

Ironically, the “consolation prize” for atheists, naturalists, humanists, etc.—who have never had a religious experience and would rationally reduce them to some phenomena of biological evolution, psychological delusion, sociological invention, idealistic projection, linguistic illusion, etc.—is to be classified as a crypto religion! Specifically, Hick argues:

that from the point of view of the pluralistic hypothesis people can, and increasingly do, respond in their lives to the universal presence of the Real, the ultimate reality, without using any religious concepts or indeed whilst explicitly rejecting them all. For they may feel, and act upon, an unconscious awareness of the presence as a responsibility to seek justice or to create peace or to serve their fellow humans in a great variety of ways. In post-Christian Europe this is a widespread phenomenon, worthy of the utmost respect and support.⁷⁵

Furthermore, in the context of salvation/liberation, Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis places religious non-realists into the same category as religious realists in transforming human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness via spiritual, political, or economic activity:

⁷⁵Hick, *Interpretation*, xli.

in the new age of sociological consciousness in which we now live the practical dispositional aspect of awareness of the Real is taking new forms. . . . The religious motivation for seeking structural change, now that human knowledge includes some understanding of the dynamics of social and economic life. . . . is two-fold. First, suffering of every kind is that from which we seek deliverance; and the awareness of the ultimate unity of the human race. . . . makes it a responsibility to relieve the suffering of others whenever we can. And second, the transcending of self-centeredness is severely inhibited by the need anxiously to fend off starvation, disease and oppression. And so the struggle for liberation from crippling poverty, illness and exploitation is also a fight to create the conditions within which inner liberation is possible. . . . Thus from a religious point of view the basic intent of the Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist, and broader socialist movements, as also of ‘liberation theology’ and the contemporary drive for racial and gender equality, has to be interpreted as a dispositional response of the modern sociologically conditioned consciousness to the Real.⁷⁶

Regarding the “great secular movements” in the twentieth century in Russia, eastern Europe, China, and elsewhere, Hick notes that “communist ideology has certain features in common with the traditional religions (concepts of evil and salvation, eschatology, scriptures, a church with a priestly hierarchy and so on),” thus, “in terms of the family-resemblance analysis adopted in Chapter 1 these secular movements accordingly appear on the map of diverse overlapping phenomena covered by the umbrella term ‘religion’.”⁷⁷

To be sure, Hick admits, “the communist experiment is very recent, indeed probably still only in its infancy. It remains to be seen to what extent it can become a form of life that makes possible a salvific self-transcendence and a re-centering in the Real as manifested in the social ideals of justice, equality and the unify of the human family.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, under Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis, not only can all religions be brought under the same umbrella, but also every explicitly humanist or atheist political, social, or economic “liberation” movement. As such, it is interesting to note that the only religious ambiguity Hick ultimately allows to exist in his Pluralistic Hypothesis universe is in philosophical argumentation; even experiences which are explicitly interpreted by a person to be anti-religious, non-realist, and purely political, still implicitly qualify as unconscious religious responses to the Real. Surprisingly, then, rather than the natural level of meaning having the least amount of cognitive freedom due to an external environment immediately imposing itself upon one’s consciousness, according to Hick’s system, the religious level of meaning appears to be coercively absolute and unavoidable and,

⁷⁶Ibid., 305-06.

⁷⁷Ibid., 308.

⁷⁸Ibid., 309.

consequently, actually possess the least amount of cognitive freedom. In other words, atheistic naturalism only remains an equally viable interpretation of reality in the philosophical arena of ideas, but once actual experience is submitted as evidence in Hick's epistemology, "self-professed atheists" become "upside down Christian fundamentalists."⁷⁹ Therefore, ironically, in Hick's rejection of naturalistic reductionism, he ends up proposing a version of supernaturalistic reductionism, where every interpretation is shrunk down to fit into his Pluralistic Hypothesis.⁸⁰ Furthermore, this is not mere argument development from one section to another, but a clear inconsistency between Hick's religious ambiguity in Part Two and his religious epistemology in Part Three. Put another way, ambiguity is a cloak Hick wraps himself in until he no longer needs

⁷⁹Ibid. xli.

⁸⁰It is interesting to note two other epistemological "blasphemies" Hick accuses non-realists of making; eschatological pessimism and unintentional elitism. Regarding these he writes:

There is, however, a fundamental anomaly in this non-realist position: namely that whereas the central core of religious discourse interpreted in a realist way constitutes, if true, good news to all humankind, on a non-realist interpretation it constitutes bad news for all except a fortunate minority.... That language presents a picture which, whilst often grimly pessimistic in the short run—acknowledging fully the structural inevitability of suffering and the universality of moral wickedness—is nevertheless on the long view profoundly optimistic. For it looks beyond death to resurrection, beyond sin and suffering to an eternal heavenly life, beyond the pain-ridden wheel of Samsara through the gateway of enlightenment to Moksha or to the 'further shore' of Nirvana. [205-06]

But in order for the religious message, that the universe is from our human point of view ultimately such as to be rejoiced in, to be good news for all and not only for those few who can realize Moksha, Nirvana, an eternal quality of existence in this life, the structure of the universe must be such as to make this possible.... [However] if God/Brahman/ the Dharmakaya are human ideas, existing only *in mente*, and if life terminates definitively at bodily death, then the universe is good only for a small minority of men and women. It does *not* sustain a religious message that is good news for all. [206]

The kind of non-realist religiousness advocated by such contemporaries as D. Z. Phillips and Don Cupitt offers, then, welcome news for the few which is at the same time grim news for the many. It is for this reason that it has to face the charge of an unintended elitism. This charge is not avoided by saying that the non-realist religious person, having found his or her own salvation, is called actively to spread the message, and also to work politically to change the social structures which make it virtually impossible for so many to respond. For even if the human situation should presently change markedly for the better, so that a much greater proportion of people are able to find inner peace and fulfillment, it would still be true that thousands of millions have already lived and died, their highest potentialities unfilled—and, if the non-realists are right, permanently and irrevocably unfulfilled. This would negate any notion of the ultimate goodness of the universe. [207]

While Hick makes his case for "The Cosmic Optimism of Post-Axial Religion" in chapter 4, it is difficult to distinguish between, for example, the eschatology of a Buddhist and that of an atheist. Practically speaking, what is the difference between one's personal consciousness dissolving into a metaphysical Absolute and one's personal existence decomposing in a physical grave; both scenarios involve non-personal and non-conscious ends. Furthermore, as Hick points out, what fullness of experience or meaning in life is lost by the atheist who devotes his or her life to social, political, and economic liberation rather than meditating on a metaphysical Absolute? Therefore, rather than epistemological prowess, this is just another illustration of Hick's presuppositionalism; favoring "optimistic" and "encompassing" realist religious interpretations over "pessimistic" and "elitist" non-realist religious ones because the former fit his Pluralistic Hypothesis but the latter do not. As an aside, it is also difficult for Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis to escape claims of elitism considering all other systems ultimately bow down before his.

it, moving to the way the world is actually experienced; however, whenever his epistemology gets too close to literal ontological meaning being attributed to the Divine via religious experience, Hick puts back on the cloak of ambiguity. This inconsistency highlights his presuppositionalism and undermines the validity of his Pluralistic Hypothesis.

In the final chapter of his epistemology, “The Rationality of Religious Belief” (ch. 13),⁸¹ Hick camouflages his experientially coercive presuppositionalism for the Real by returning to a more philosophically ambiguous argument based on the principle of cognitive freedom. To begin with, Hick identifies the question at hand:

I have argued thus far that religious belief does not properly depend upon inference from evidences discovered in the structure of the universe or in the course of human experience—for such evidences are always theoretically ambiguous—but upon unconsciously interpreting the impacts of the environment in such a way that it is consciously experienced as having the kind of meaning articulated in religious language. In interpreting in this way the believer is making a basic cognitive choice and thereby running a risk: the risk of being very importantly mistaken.... Under the influence of one of the great religious figures and/or traditions one is interpreting and experiencing one’s situation in a way which will ultimately prove to be either appropriate or inappropriate. If inappropriate, we are being profoundly deluded. If appropriate, we shall have so interpreted our situation that the picture of it in terms of which we live is in basic conformity with its actual character. In either case we have made a cognitive choice which has some of the characteristics of a wager.⁸²

Hick explains that his epistemological “justification of theistic belief does not consist in an argument moving directly to the conclusion that God exists but rather in an argument for the rationality of so believing despite the fact that this cannot be proven or shown to be in any objective sense more probable than not.”⁸³ His purpose, then, is to “establish the reasonableness of religious persons trusting and proceeding to live on the basis of their own religious experience,” or, simply put, “that it is rational to believe in the reality of God.”⁸⁴ Recognizing the possibility of epistemological misperception leading to an incorrect interpretation of reality in natural experience and applying this concept to the realm of religious experience, Hick again stresses that “we shall not be asking directly whether A’s ‘experience of existing in the presence

⁸¹This chapter is reproduced in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), edited by R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman. It consists of 24 chapters arguing for and against atheism, Wittgensteinian fideism, Reformed epistemology, natural theology, prudential accounts of religious belief, and rational belief and religious experience. For those seeking to understand Hick’s epistemology in a wider context against competing options, this book is an excellent place to begin.

⁸²Hick, *Interpretation*, 210.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 211.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 211.

of God' *is* genuine, but rather whether it is rational for A to trust his or her experience as veridical and to behave on the basis of it." Therefore, he concludes, "to speak in this chapter of the rationality of belief in God, the reference is to the rationality of the believing, not of what it believed. A proposition believed can be true or false: it is believing of it that is rational or irrational."⁸⁵ As such, the propositional content of an interpretation of religious experience may be incorrect, but it does not indicate that the person was irrational for believing it.

Using a "Parity Argument," Hick reiterates the epistemological similarity between human responses to and beliefs about physical environments and human responses to and beliefs about religious environments, and asserts "that it is no more possible to prove the existence of God than the existence of a material world but theistic belief arises, like perceptual belief, from a natural response of the human mind to its experiences."⁸⁶ Furthermore, in the context of trusting one's normal experiences, he explains, "we can adopt the general principle that in the absence of adequate grounds for doubt it is rational to trust our putative experience of an external world that is apparently impinging upon us. This reflects our basic operative conception of what it is to be in cognitive touch with our environment;" and, thus, "to believe, without any positive reason, that that which persistently appears within our experience has no objective existence, or to fail to adjust our beliefs about our environment in accordance with our seeming experience of it, would border upon insanity."⁸⁷ Furthermore, while acknowledging that not all religious and quasi-religious experiences provide good grounds for beliefs, and internal misperception or external manipulation is possible, Hick states that "One who has a powerful and continuous sense of existing in the presence of God *ought* therefore to be convinced that God exists. Accordingly the religious person, experiencing life in terms of the divine presence, is rationally entitled to believe what he or she experiences to be the case—namely that God is real, or exists."⁸⁸ Therefore, on the one hand, Hick admits, "however psychologically coercive an 'experience of existing in God's presence' might be, it would be entirely put out of court by our arrival, along some other route, at the knowledge or the well-grounded belief that there is no God."⁸⁹ But, on the other

⁸⁵Ibid., 212.

⁸⁶Ibid., 214.

⁸⁷Ibid., 215.

⁸⁸Ibid., 216.

⁸⁹Ibid., 217.

hand, he continues, “the existence of God must be held to be possible—and not merely a bare logical possibility, but an *important* possibility—if the ‘experience of living in God’s presence’ is to be taken seriously.”⁹⁰

Due to the fact that Hick is arguing for the rationality of religious belief based on real religious experience and not any particular propositional truth drawn from the religious experience itself, he suggests:

we are led to conclude that in the absence of any positive reason to distrust one’s experience—and the mere fact that in this religiously ambiguous universe a different, naturalistic, epistemic practice is also possible does not constitute such a reason—it is rational, sane, reasonable for those whose religious experiences strongly lead them to do so to believe wholeheartedly in the reality of God.⁹¹

Conversely, Hick again acknowledges that “the general possibility remains that apparently cognitive religious experiences, as such and *in toto* is delusory. Indeed, it will be said, this is more than a mere logical possibility. For various naturalistic theories have been offered to explain why and how people seem to ‘experience God’ even though no God exists to be experienced.”⁹² Interestingly, then, Hick asserts that “when we take the naturalistic theories as total explanations, excluding any divine impact triggering a culturally conditioned religious apperception, it is, I think, clear that both their acceptance and their rejection arise out of a prior commitment.” In the previous chapter, however, Hick did not mention that naturalistic reductionism was merely presuppositional but that it was an inaccurate interpretation of reality. Similarly, Hick does not attribute his own religious realism to mere presuppositions but argues that it is the accurate interpretation of reality. Regardless, he continues:

Alternative total views confront one another, one interpreting religious data naturalistically and the other religiously. Each may in principle be complete, leaving no data unaccounted for; and the acceptance of either arises from a basic cognitive choice or act of faith. Once the choice has been made, and whilst it is operative, the alternative global view is reduced to a bare logical possibility. This is the status both of the various naturalistic theories of religion... and likewise of theistic theories.⁹³

⁹⁰Ibid., 219.

⁹¹Ibid., 221.

⁹²Ibid., 226.

⁹³Ibid., 226.

Ironically, then, after six chapters of epistemology where intellectual, philosophical ambiguity was exchanged for actual, experiential reality, readers find themselves back where they started when Hick writes:

The universe as it confronts us is ambivalent, in that we can construe it either religiously or naturalistically; but when one option has been adopted it constitutes one's life a religious, or a naturalistic, response to reality. Such a response is ultimately true or false according as it conforms or fails to conform to the actual nature of things. However there can at this stage be no confirmation of the final appropriateness of either response.⁹⁴

The cloak of ambiguity was supposedly breached with experience yet, once all is said and done, it comes down to one's presuppositions acting as interpretive boundaries for conscious meaning and proper behavior. Nevertheless, the fundamental question Hick is addressing in this chapter is whether or not people are within their epistemic right to accept the rationality of religious belief at all: "The question then is whether the possibility, in an religiously ambiguous universe, that religious experience as a whole is illusory renders it irrational for those who participate in a form of such experiences to believe in the reality of the divine. I think not."⁹⁵

While Hick does eloquently defend a person's epistemological right to believe, in the end, his argument is too presuppositional to change the mind of an atheist. Ironically, the philosophical force of Hick's religious ambiguity places doubt into his own religious epistemology; which is not the case for those who accept arguments from natural theology and are concerned with the literal propositional truth of their religious experiences. Nevertheless, for Hick, religious realism is more experientially probable than not. Therefore, when he applies his religious epistemology to the fact of pervasive, ubiquitous, and diverse religious experiences throughout human history, the result is his Pluralistic Hypothesis: "Having, then, rejected the skeptical view that religious experience is *in toto* delusionary, and the dogmatic view that it is all delusory except that of one's own tradition, I propose to explore the third possibly that the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it."⁹⁶ Unfortunately for Hick, inconsistencies between his religious ambiguity and religious epistemology have undermined the philosophical foundation and psychological attractiveness of his Pluralistic Hypothesis.

⁹⁴Ibid., 227.

⁹⁵Ibid., 227.

⁹⁶Ibid., 236.

CONCLUSION

In his seminal book *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, John Hick sets before himself an audacious task, to offer a comprehensive religious interpretation of religion. To do so properly, he must explain not only why there are so many conflicting religious experiences recorded around the world, but also why there are others in the same world who report no religious experiences at all. Furthermore, Hick must not only explain the present state of affairs in the world, but also reconcile it with the world's historical past all the while turning his focus to the future. To realistically meet such requirements, the explanation must be flexible enough to move and grow when and where needed but also structured and principled enough to logically and psychologically support the weight of so diverse an assemblage of parts and pieces. The answer came when Hick applied Immanuel Kant's epistemology to religion, resulting in a Pluralistic Hypothesis with a primary bifurcation between the noumenal Real-in-itself and phenomenal religious experience and a secondary bifurcation between mythical truth and literal truth. To set the foundation for his Pluralistic Hypothesis, Hick first presents his case for religious ambiguity and then his case for religious epistemology. The former highlights the philosophical inconclusiveness of theistic and atheist arguments for the existence/non-existence of the Divine. The latter defends the reality of religious experience and the rationality of religious belief. This two-pronged approach insulates Ultimate Reality from any literal ontological specificity while defending the general authenticity of religious experience. Unfortunately for Hick, this paper has shown how inconsistencies between his argument for religious ambiguity and his argument for religious epistemology act as detractors from rather than support for his Pluralistic Hypothesis. Simply put, though attempting a comprehensive religious interpretation of religion, Hick only achieved a comprehensive presentation of his personal preference.

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