

Does Hick's pluralism render inter-faith dialogue 'inconsequential'?

A response to David Cheetham

David Cheetham's Critique

Yesterday, Professor David Cheetham presented a brief summary of John Hick's religious pluralism. Hick's ideas on pluralism are deeply interconnected with some other major topics of his philosophy of religion, such as the nature of faith, arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, and life after death. What Hick says on religious pluralism, or better on the reliability of religious experience despite the diversity of its forms, is just one part of his overall attempt to show that religious faith is a rationally justified option. I wish David had said more on this larger setting (as he actually did in an earlier draft of his paper which he had kindly sent me in advance).

David mentioned briefly that Hick's answers to the pressing and often uneasy questions in the philosophy of religion have become objects of severe criticism. But David was more reserved in unpacking and expounding his own critique of Hick. I'm sure John Hick himself would have encouraged David not to withhold whatever objections he might have. Hick considered himself a fallibilist. He knew that in our present life, we are not dealing with infallible certainties but – at best – with well-reasoned presuppositions or hypotheses. Hence it is necessary to subject our hypothetical assumptions to the test of critical inquiry in order to find out whether they might have a chance to stand. In my paper, I will deal with an objection that David, in two of his recent publications, has raised against John Hick's religious pluralism. I think that this objection is of crucial significance not only in relation to the issue of religious pluralism but ultimately to our understanding of theology, human "God-talk", in general, and hence to the kind of enterprise that one might call "global theology" or "interreligious theology".

In an essay published in 2020 David accuses Hick's postulate of an ineffable Real as a theory that (1) "disappoints religious believers", (2) "renders inconsequential the conversation between religions about the ultimate", and (3) "anaesthetizes interreligious meetings" (Cheetham 2020a: 96). David repeats the same objection in similar words in his recent book *Creation and Religious Pluralism. A Christian Theology* (Cheetham 2020b: 20,

27). As a result, David says, we need to look for a more convincing and dialogically more fruitful theory.

In considering David's objection, let us first be clear that Hick has not developed his pluralist hypothesis only or primarily in order to facilitate inter-faith dialogue. The pluralist hypothesis is rather closely connected with David Hume's challenge to the reliability of religious experience. In contrast to sense-experience, religious experience leads to a wide range of apparently contradicting truth-claims. Hence, so the challenge goes, even in principle religious experience cannot be regarded as reliable. In addition, the development of Hick's religious pluralism is also connected to the problem of evil. The problem of evil would get even worse if the possibility of salvation was restricted to Christians alone. Such a situation would be in open contradiction to the belief in a God of universal love. If, however, it can be shown that different concepts of the Ultimate are not necessarily contradictory and that a salvific orientation to the Ultimate can indeed be fostered by a variety of different religious conceptions, these two problems are solved. That Hick developed his pluralist hypothesis against the background of these two problems, the Humean challenge and the problem of evil, can be clearly seen from the concluding pages of Hick's book *Arguments for the Existence of God* published in 1970 (Hick 1970: 117-120) and from various remarks in Hick's autobiographical accounts (e.g. Hick 1980: 4f; 1998: 89f).

Nevertheless, religious pluralism does have important implications for inter-faith dialogue. As Hick stated in 1980, on non-pluralist premises, dialogue will consist in "two (or more) people bearing mutual witness to their own faiths, each in the firm conviction that his is the final truth and in hope of converting the other", a dialogue that "can only result either in conversion or in a hardening of differences – occasionally the former but more often the latter. In order for dialogue to be mutually fruitful, lesser changes than total conversion must be possible and must be hoped for on both (or all) sides" (Hick 1980: 85). These "lesser changes" indicate the kind of inter-faith learning that Hick saw enabled on pluralist grounds. Though even if fostering fruitful inter-faith dialogue was not the primary reason behind Hick's pluralist hypothesis, it is a significant aspect.

David does not tell us whether he feels that Hick's pluralism succeeds in relation to the Humean challenge and the problem of evil. Yet is he right in holding that Hick has at least failed regarding this additional aim of his pluralist hypothesis, i.e. fostering constructive inter-faith dialogue? Let us look at the reasons on which David's critique is based. *First,*

according to David, Hick's postulate of an ineffable Real is disappointing to religious believers because it is, allegedly, a form of agnosticism. *Second*, Hick's postulate renders interreligious conversation inconsequential or "fruitless" (Cheetham 2020b: 27) because in dialogue we cannot "usefully communicate anything about a reality that is transcategorical" (Cheetham 2020b: 27). *Third*, this recognition of the alleged fruitlessness of dialogue coupled with the "the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of each other's religious beliefs" (2020a: 100) functions "as an anaesthetic for the actual meeting of religions" (Cheetham 2020a: 100).

At the centre of this critique is Hick's claim of the transcategoriality and hence ineffability of the Real or, more precisely, of the Real as it is in itself. It is this claim that David – together with other critics – considers as a religiously disappointing agnosticism, as that which makes dialogue pointless and in the end silences it. In my response, I shall *first* clarify in what sense Hick's postulate is and in what sense it is not a form of agnosticism. *Second*, I will suggest that Hick's hermeneutics solves a crucial problem in the religious understanding of religious language. And, as a result, I will *thirdly* argue that Hick's hermeneutics directs inter-faith dialogue to such a realm where it is indeed fruitful and meaningful. The only kind of discourse on which Hick's view should, at least intentionally, have a moderating impact is the rather modern and by no means orthodox doctrinal hubris regarding the capacity of finite minds to capture the infinite.

Agnosticism

"Agnosticism" may mean quite a number of different things. Let me pick out three possible meanings from among a much larger field. In the philosophy of religion, "agnosticism" is at times just used as an equivalent to "atheism" or "naturalism". On other occasions it is used more strictly as a label for the position that, at least for now, we do not know or cannot know whether or not there is an ultimate reality, that is, a "reality which transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself" (Hick 1993b: 164). And in a still more restricted sense, "agnosticism" may mean that we do not know what such an ultimate reality would be like in case it exists. I am not concerned here with agnosticism as a different term for naturalism. In the other two cases I mentioned "agnosticism" has something to do with "not knowing" – and this is in line with the original meaning of the Greek word behind the term. But that raises the new problem of what we mean by

“knowing” or “not knowing”. To cut a much longer and much more complicated story short, let me restrict “knowledge” here to something like “infallible knowledge”. Do we or can we infallibly know that there is a reality transcending everything else? If we answer “No” to that question and call this “agnosticism”, then Hick is indeed an agnostic. As is St. Paul who famously reminded the small group of early Corinthian Christians that for now we lack full knowledge but need to rely on the dim vision of looking into, or through, a dark mirror (1 Cor 13, 9-12). Is Paul’s position “disappointing to religious believers”? Well, yes, to some among them it is. Namely to those who confuse belief with infallible knowledge. But they are surely not representative of all religious people. I cannot present the data of any census, but I guess that quite a number of religious people are aware that belief is not infallible knowledge but has much to do with risk and trust. Clearly, many testimonies of faith within the major religious traditions give witness to this type of understanding. So, Hick is surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in this sort of agnosticism. But apart from such good company, his stance is based on the well-founded philosophical conviction that we do not have any argument that would infallibly and coercively prove the existence of a transcendent reality and that we also do not have any argument that would infallibly and coercively prove the opposite. Our world can be consistently interpreted both from a non-religious and from a religious point of view. This is what Hick means by the “inscrutable ambiguity” of the universe (Hick 1989:122-5). And this implies that the world is a space which equally permits reasonable trust and reasonable distrust in the existence of the Ultimate, but not anything like infallible knowledge.

Yet is Hick also an agnostic when it comes to the further question of whether we might know what ultimate reality is like in case it exists? This question is more difficult to answer. My guess is that Hick is not agnostic in this respect. When Hick repeatedly states that the Real in itself is “neither one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive” (Hick 1989: 246), he does not mean that the Real is *either* one or many, person or thing, and so one. He does not say that we cannot know which of these attributes properly apply and which not. His claim is quite different, namely that “its nature, infinitely rich in itself, cannot be expressed in our human concepts” (1995: 28). Hick is not agnostic in the sense of saying that we do not know whether the Real is either personal or impersonal. He is rather convinced that the Real, if it exists, is a reality that necessarily goes beyond those categories which apply to the limited reality confined to space and time. In that

sense he postulates that the Real *is* “transcategorical”, that its nature goes necessarily beyond what can be captured by finite categories (Hick 2001: 76-89).

So how does Hick know that the Real is transcategorical? Well, again, he does not claim to “know” this in the sense of infallible knowledge. But he takes his conviction to be in line with an overwhelmingly strong strand of thinking in all the major religious traditions as well as with sound philosophical reasoning. Transcendent Reality, if it exists, goes by definition beyond the limitations of empirical reality. Therefore, Hick calls it “a natural and reasonable assumption: for an ultimate that is limited in some mode would be limited by something other than itself; and this would entail its non-ultimacy. And with the assumption of the unlimitedness of God, Brahman, the Dharmakaya, goes the equally natural and reasonable assumption that the Ultimate, in its unlimitedness, exceeds all positive characterisations in human thought and language” (Hick 1989: 237f).

From the perspective of the history of religions, I suggest that Hick is clearly right when he states “that all serious religious thought affirms that the Ultimate, in its infinite divine reality, is utterly beyond our comprehension” (Hick 1995: 58). This is confirmed by a careful study that Holmes Rolston III undertook in 1985 where he compared Augustine, al-Ghazālī, Śankara and Nāgārjuna. Rolston summarized their views about the Ultimate with the words: “the comprehensive ultimate is, almost analytically, incomprehensible. Comprehended by it, we cannot comprehend it” (Rolston III 1985: 136). According to Thomas Aquinas “man reaches the highest point of his knowledge about God when he knows that he knows him not, inasmuch as he knows that that which is God transcends whatsoever he conceives of him” (*De potentia*, q. 7, a. 5., ad 14). And Aquinas means what he says: It is indeed highest knowledge to understand that God is a reality which necessarily transcends all our conceptions – a reality that is “transcategorical”, a term that actually fits Aquinas’ Latin words: *deus non est in genere* (“God is not in categories”, *Summa theologiae* I 3, 5). Similarly, Hick’s affirmation of the divine transcategoriality is not presented as a form of agnosticism, but as a rather firm conclusion derived from the transcendent or infinite nature of the Ultimate, in case it really exists.

It is important to note that Hick did not introduce the idea of divine ineffability in order to circumvent the problem that conflicting religious truth claims cause for his pluralist hypothesis. Already in his pre-pluralist writings Hick affirmed divine infinity and – as a result – divine ineffability. In an article dating from 1961 (!), he wrote that God “stands in no

wider context” but “constitutes the context in which everything else stands. [...] As the final unconditioned, all-conditioning reality God cannot be included within any system of explanation.” Hence “God cannot be but mysterious to us.” (Hick 1988: 89) The same position is taken in the first edition of his *Philosophy of Religion* from 1963 where he stated: “Because our terms can only be derived from our finite human experience, they cannot be adequate to apply to God...” (Hick 1963: 83). What Hick realised in his later development is that this very traditional and highly orthodox affirmation of the Ultimate’s ineffability, together with the fact that such affirmation is found across all the major religious traditions, has significant implications for solving the Humean challenge regarding the alleged incompatibility of the different concepts and images of the Ultimate.

The fact that Hick affirmed divine ineffability long before the development of his pluralist hypothesis shows that this affirmation is not derived from an uncritical reception of Kant’s epistemological criticism, as some of Hick’s more superficial critics proclaim. Hick himself has emphasized repeatedly that he uses the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon merely as an analogy for his own suggestion of how to relate the different images and concepts of the Ultimate and their correspondingly different forms of experience to the supposed existence of one singular ultimately Real. Moreover, this analogy works only under an important caveat, namely – as Hick says – that “the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is *that same world* as it appears to our human consciousness” (Hick 1989: 241; my emphasis). Applying this model as an analogy to the relation between the Ultimate and its different perceptions within human experience does not mean that the Real is remote from our experience. On the contrary, there is only one ultimate Reality and it is *that same Real* which is experienced and reflected in a diversity of ways among the major religious traditions of the world. The distinction between “the Real in itself”, that is the Real as noumenon, and the Real as phenomenon, that is, “the Real as humanly thought of and experienced”, signifies that the nature of the Real, as it exists independently of our perception, always and inevitably exceeds – infinitely exceeds – our experience-based concepts of the Real. This suggests that our concepts and images are expressive of our limited experiences of the unlimited Real. But it does not suggest that what we experience would not be the Real, because the really Real would be separated from us by some unbridgeable ontological gap. In 2006, Hick wrote that we can be aware of the presence of the Transcendent only “in virtue of its immanence within our own nature” (Hick 2006: 164). This understanding, says Hick, avoids the chronic problem of Kantian

epistemology that on Kantian premises “the thing in itself causes its own phenomenal appearances, although causality [...] is one of the categories in terms of which we form that phenomenal world” (Hick 2006: 164).

Thus, according to Hick, the Real is not remote from human experience as David mistakenly assumes when he writes that “Hick’s quasi-Kantian limitations [...] place the Real out of reach in a ‘noumenal’” (Hick 2021a: 106). On the contrary, for Hick the Real is nearer to us than our jugular vein, to borrow the famous phrase from the Qur’an (50:16). Or, to quote Augustine: God is “more inward to me than my most inward and higher than my highest” (*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo; Confessiones* 3.6.11). Precisely that same ultimate Reality which knows of no limitations and is in that sense “higher than my highest”, is not confined to a transcendent state but is at the same time immanent. It does not differ from finite reality in the same sense in which one finite thing is different from another finite thing. In contrast to finite objects, the Real’s being different implies non-duality. Already in 1991, just two years after the first edition of *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick wrote: “According to the *Interpretation of Religion* (IR) hypothesis the Real is present to us in and through everything, but most importantly, so far as personal growth is concerned, through other finite persons and the moral claims they mediate” (Hick 1991: 242). David’s demand for a theory in which “the Real becomes a living experienced Reality (rather than a formal upper-storey postulate)” (Cheetham 2021a: 106) has long been fully satisfied in Hick’s considerations.

From here let us now take a closer look at Hick’s hermeneutics of religious language or human “God-talk”.

Hermeneutics

As we all know, the theology and philosophy of and within the major religious traditions is not confined to the proclamation of apophatic truth. The big question is how the religions’ true affirmation of the Ultimate’s ineffability can be reconciled with the many cataphatic statements which also abound in the religions. It would be clearly inconsistent to say, for example, that the Real is omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent and also ineffable. Or to say that the Real is truth, consciousness, bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*) and in addition ineffable. If the Ultimate is ineffable, this must alter the hermeneutical status of all cataphatic language.

The major religious traditions have not been unaware of this problem. They developed various hermeneutical devices on how to combine the truth of apophatic negation with the truth of cataphatic affirmation, such as the theories of *satyadvaya* (two truths or realities) in Hinduism and Buddhism, the concept of *upāya* (skilful means) in Mahāyāna, the theory of *analogia entis* in Christianity or the dynamic correlation of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* (resemblance and removal) in traditional Islamic discourse on the Divine Names. Hick offers his own theory of how to make sense of cataphatic language without surrendering the apophatic insight. This theory has two main aspects.

On one hand, positive language about the Real is not about the Real in its unspeakable infinity but about our finite impressions of it. The *personae* and *impersonae* of the Real, as Hick calls them, are contingent and developing phenomena within the history of religions which comprise genuine human experiences of the Real. They are not different expressions of the same experience, but different expressions of different forms of experiences of the same ultimate Reality! The answer to the Humean challenge consists in relating the different truth claims not to the ineffable Ultimate but to the effable human experiences of the Ultimate. From that perspective they are not necessarily conflicting because they are “about different manifestations of the Real” (Hick 1995: 43).

On the other hand, positive language about the Real is not merely expressive of but also *conducive to* genuine experience. This understanding has something to do with Hick’s concept of meaning. According to Hick, any concept in general is adequate if it captures the nature of the referent such that a certain behaviour or practical disposition in relation to its referent is appropriate: “We can accordingly define meaning as the perceived (or misperceived) character of an object or situation such that to perceive it as having that character is to be in a distinctive dispositional state in relation to it” (Hick 1989: 131). It is this pragmatic theory of meaning that Hick employs in order to make sense of the cataphatic talk about the Ultimate (Hick 1989: 151, 351). Conceptualizing the Real by one of its authentic manifestations, its *personae* and *impersonae*, is to be in a correct and “distinctive dispositional state in relation to it”. The language which literally or analogically applies to the genuine manifestations of the Real in human experience is, according to Hick, mythologically true in relation to the infinite Real in itself, because such language has the potential to put us into the right disposition towards the Real: “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. [...] true religious myths are [...] those that evoke

in us attitudes and modes of behaviour which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real” (Hick 1989: 248). One may doubt whether the term “mythological” (probably influenced by Rudolf Bultmann) was a good choice. Perhaps it would have been wise to change it to “metaphorical” as Hick himself did when he switched from speaking about the *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) to *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (1993a). Other alternatives could have been Paul Tillich’s designation of all God-talk as “symbolical” – and Hick himself acknowledges the proximity of his hermeneutics to Tillich’s (Hick 1995: 51f). Or he could have used Karl Rahner’s characterization of all God-talk as “mystagogical”. But terminology aside, Hick’s point is that all cataphatic language about the Real does not apply in any literal or analogical sense to the Real as it is in its transcategorical infinity, but it does apply to the Real as it *is* “in relation to us”, that is, to human beings in their specific existential and culturally conditioned situations (Hick 1995: 63; similarly: 65; 2001: 86f). This kind of hermeneutics opens up ample space for meaningful dialogue and interreligious learning.

Dialogue

Obviously, some of Hick’s critics assume that inter-faith dialogue would be meaningful or fruitful only if it led to some new or better conceptual insights into the nature of ultimate Reality. To mention just one recent example: John Thatamanil complains that “on a Hickian account, dialogue with other traditions does not lead to more knowledge about ultimate reality. [...] The trouble is that if religious traditions don’t have access to ultimate reality – if the other has no genuine knowledge of ultimate reality – then what do I stand to learn from other traditions?” (Thatamanil 2020: 78f). My guess is that a similar assumption lies also behind David’s allegation that Hick’s hypothesis renders dialogue inconsequential. Now, Thatamanil wrongly presupposes that according to Hick religious traditions have “no genuine knowledge of ultimate reality”. Instead, as I tried to show, Hick confirms that they do have genuine knowledge (though not infallible) of the ultimate, namely the knowledge or, better, insight that transcendent reality, if it exists, necessarily transcends all conceptual categories because otherwise it would not be truly ultimate or transcendent. As Catherine Cornille (2020: 117) has recently argued, the recognition of substantial similarities or commonalities between religions can count as a crucial result of inter-faith learning and it is likely to lead to an “intensification” or “amplification of the meaning and truth” in one’s

own tradition. Such common affirmation and reciprocal recognition of insight is not only itself the result of learning but can be the starting point to any further going learning processes.

So what if such common affirmation concerns the transcategoriality and hence ineffability of the Real? Does that mean that the cataphatic descriptions of the Real as we actually find them in the religions are reflective only of our human nature? Or are they, at least to some extent, also reflective of the Real in its transcendent nature, that is of the Real in itself? Hick has consistently denied the latter alternative, because this would clearly contradict the truth of the religions' apophatic insight and would undermine the affirmation of the Real's transcendence. But from this it does not follow that cataphatic talk is only about human nature – especially if we consider Hick's view that religious experience is possible in virtue of the Real's "immanence within our own nature". According to Hick, cataphatic language is in the end about the experiential interface between the Ultimate and the human. In this realm we are dealing with genuine and significant knowledge (with the caveat that such knowledge is not infallible). Hence, Hick says about the Real: "We cannot know it as it is in itself, but we do know it as it affects us" (Hick 2006: 206). And this implies that the Real in itself "is such that, in relation to us," it is validly experienced in a particular but diverse range of ways (Hick 2004: xxii-xxvi).

Thus, cataphatic language gives us a clue of what happens when human beings genuinely experience ultimate reality, of how such experience transforms human lives and how it sheds new and significant light on human existence and the nature of the world in which we find ourselves. For if a reality that transcends the limits of time and space really exists, and if its transcendence also implies immanence, the world in which we live is not confined to its seeming limits. Such limits rather appear as a kind of veil which in some ways hides and in other ways reveals the light that shines from beyond and within. In this way, Hick's hermeneutics of religious insight and religious language leaves ample space for interreligious learning (Schmidt-Leukel 2017: 109-146, 222-245). One exciting result of such learning may be the discovery that the typological differences between the major religious traditions reappear in some modified form *within each* of these traditions. For each religious tradition is internally highly diverse. And the patterns of such *intra*-religious diversity resemble the pattern of global *inter*-religious diversity. Different conceptions of the Real such as personal or impersonal also reappear within each tradition. Something similar can be observed in relation to different conceptions regarding world affirming or world-

renouncing spiritualities, or conceptions regarding self-help and other-help in the process of salvation, or the expectation of the eschatological end in terms of losing oneself in the ocean of the Ultimate or finding oneself in a perfected supernatural community, to mention just a few. Moreover, such patterns of typological differences can also be observed at the still smaller level of individual persons. The individual person too can host diverse types of being religious – either simultaneously in the form of a hybrid religious identity or successively by undergoing different forms of religiousness in the course of one’s life. Given that similar patterns of diversity are scaling in that they reappear at various levels of diversity, religious diversity exhibits a fractal structure. A dialogical, interreligious theology can further explore the nature of such fractal patterns pursuing the question to what extent fractals point towards complementarity instead of incompatibility. This in turn carries the promise of learning about the multifaceted significance that the Real has for and within human existence (cf. Race & Knitter 2019). Yet it also needs to be stated clearly and frankly that the modern – and by no means traditional – idea that our finite human concepts would be fit to capture the Infinite and provide an accurate description of the Real in its transcendent nature is misguided and misleading. “For”, as Augustin once said, “if you comprehend it, it is not God” (*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*; Augustin, *Sermo* 117, 3.5). Or as it was taught about more than eight centuries earlier in the *Kena Upaniṣad* (2, 3):

It is not understood by those who [say they] understand It.

It is understood by those who [say they] understand It not.

(Radhakrishnan & Moore 1989: 42)

Let me conclude with a final quotation:

Human beings have named him with different voices in different languages of different nations. Yet his name is unique, highest, infinite, ineffable and unknown.

(Nikolaus von Kues 2002: 35, n. 8)

This is not a quotation from John Hick but from Nicholas of Cusa, a highly orthodox Roman-Catholic theologian of the 16th century, and an early pioneer of inter-faith openness.

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