

Introduction

IN TODAY'S POSTMODERN AGE of religious diversity, John Hick, the former Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the Claremont Graduate University,¹ is widely recognized as one of the most important, if not the most influential and prolific, thinkers on religious pluralism. As possibly the most significant philosopher of religion in the second half of twentieth century, Hick's contributions to the field of philosophy of religion in general, and in religious epistemology, theistic proofs, theodicy, death and eternal life, and mysticism, in particular, have widely been recognized. It is in the area of religious pluralism, however, that Hick will long be remembered as having made his greatest and lasting contribution. Prior to Hick's influence, most discussions in philosophy of religion in the West took place almost entirely in a Judeo-Christian, if not exclusively Christian, perspective. Owing greatly to Hick's voluminous writings since the early seventies, it is now the case that no serious discussion can consciously take place outside the purview of pluralism. Hick's magnum opus, *An Interpretation of Religion*, an elaboration of his 1986 Gifford Lectures, has already become a classic in the field that no student of philosophy of religion can afford to ignore.

It is an unfortunate fact, however, that Hick's stature as the philosopher of religion *par excellence* has tended to overshadow his important theological contributions to religious pluralism. Although, to many, he is known primarily as a philosopher of religion, the field of theology has never been a completely separate discipline for Hick himself. As his writings clearly indicate, Hick sees himself as not only a philosopher but also a theologian.² In particular, Hick's contributions in Christology

1. Until his death in 2012, Hick was the emeritus professor of both the University of Birmingham and the Claremont Graduate University. He is also a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences, University of Birmingham.

2. For example, Hick writes: "I now no longer find it possible to proceed as a Christian *theologian* as though Christianity were the only religion in the world." Hick,

are of special importance from a Christian perspective since the heart of the problem of religious pluralism is, for a Christian, essentially and ultimately christological. Pluralism represents a profound challenge to the very core of Christian belief that Jesus is the unique Son of God and the only savior of all humanity. It is no accident that the development of Hick's own philosophical thoughts on pluralism closely parallels, or is even preceded by, a critical shift in the development of his own Christology. In a 1966 article written in honor of H. H. Farmer, for example, we can clearly see a glimpse of how Hick's demand for a Copernican revolution from a Christianity-centered picture to a God-centered universe of faiths was preceded by a critical move away from the traditional understanding of Christ's two natures in one person. In what was to provide the basis of his Christology for pluralism, Hick had already argued in this article for a new understanding of Jesus as *homo-agape* instead of *homoousia*.³ Such a move was to have clear implications for a Christian theology of world religions.

From the very beginning of his academic career, Hick had always shown a strong interest in the area of Christology. In what may now seem, in retrospect, to be an incredible twist of irony, an article written as early as 1958 had Hick actually criticizing D. M. Baillie's Christology in *God Was in Christ* for undermining the deity of Christ in an attempt to preserve his humanity. In this article, Hick accused Baillie of embracing an unorthodox, adoptionist Christology.⁴ However, such an orthodox form of Christology is nowhere to be found by the early seventies when Hick proposed his Copernican revolution in theology. Nevertheless, in this new and revolutionary paradigm, there emerged a clear sense in Hick's understanding that the question of the place of Christ and the Christian affirmations about him is "the most difficult of all issues" for a Copernican theology of religions.⁵ It is precisely in this regard that Hick's contribution to the theological understanding of religious pluralism is to be valued so highly. For more than any other theologian, Hick has attempted to tackle this "most important issue" of Christology head

Universe of Faiths, x (emphasis added). Also he says: "I realize more fully in the course of writing this book that the kind of *theology* at which *I* was arriving has a long and respectable ancestry." Hick, *Many Names*, 17 (emphasis added).

3. Hick, "Christology." Reprinted in Hick, *God and Universe*, 148–64.

4. See Hick, "Christology of D. M. Baillie," 1–12.

5. Hick, *Universe of Faiths*, 148–49.

on. Among Hick's earlier writings dealing with this issue, perhaps his best-known contributions were his controversial editing of *The Myth of God Incarnate*⁶ and his contributing article in the important book, *Encountering Jesus*.⁷

John Hick's 1993 book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*,⁸ marks an important milestone in Christian theology of religious pluralism. This book is, without doubt, Hick's most important contribution to Christology from the standpoint of religious pluralism. To date, no other theologian has come close to articulating in such comprehensive and sustained manner the detailed relationship between Christology and pluralism as Hick has done in this book. As the most systematic attack on the traditional understanding of the incarnation to have emerged from the realm of mainstream academic theology in recent years, this book is a lucid development and extension of the central thesis of his earlier edited book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In this book, Hick sets out to criticize the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus that "he was God incarnate, who became a man to die for the sins of the world and who founded the church to proclaim this." For Hick: "If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must be uniquely superior to all other religions."¹⁰ As the title of the book suggests, however, his central thesis is that the incarnation of Christ is better understood as a metaphor than as literal truth. More specifically, Hick has helpfully set forth his entire arguments in terms of six theses. Hick argues:

(1) that Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him; (2) that the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way; (3) that historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils; (4) that the idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal—Jesus embodied, or incarnated, the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God, so that God was able to act through him, and he accordingly embodied a love which is a human reflection of the divine

6. Hick, ed. *Myth of God Incarnate*.

7. Hick, "Inspirational Christology," 5–22.

8. Hick, *Metaphor*.

9. *Ibid.*, ix.

10. *Ibid.*

love; (5) that we can rightly take Jesus, so understood, as our Lord, the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence; and (6) that a non-traditional Christianity based upon this understanding of Jesus can see itself as one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate transcendent Reality that we call God, and can better serve the development of world community and world peace than a Christianity which continues to see itself as the locus of final revelation and purveyor of the only salvation possible for all human beings.¹¹

Given these clear and lucid arguments, the purpose of this book is to present in greater detail Hick's overall formulation of a Christology for a pluralistic age, and then to critically evaluate his foundational arguments (theses 1 and 2) as they bear upon his views of religious pluralism. A careful examination of the structure of the above arguments indicates that Hick's metaphorical Christology (theses 4 and 5) and his insistence that Christianity see itself as only one among a number of plural responses to the ultimate Reality (thesis 6) are based upon his arguments that attempt to deconstruct the literal understanding of the idea of divine incarnation (theses 1–3). In other words, Hick's first three arguments serve as the foundation upon which his last three theses are predicated. The first two theses are especially crucial, for if it is indeed true that what the church came to believe about Jesus was not ultimately rooted in his own self-understanding, and if the church's two-natures doctrine of Christ is indeed incapable of satisfactory explanation, then Hick's move towards metaphorical Christology has much justification. On the other hand, if these two theses prove unconvincing, as I will be arguing in this book, then Hick is without much warrant in breaking away from the literal form of incarnational Christology that has been at the very core of Christianity for almost two thousand years.

My thesis then is simple and straightforward: While Hick is to be applauded for clearly and rigorously articulating an alternative position on Christology for a pluralistic age, his impressive attempts to reconstruct a metaphorical Christology must ultimately be judged a failure because his foundational attempts to deconstruct the church's literal understanding of the incarnation are mainly untenable. In other words, because he is not able to convincingly demonstrate "(1) that Jesus himself

11. *Ibid.*, ix.

did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him” and “(2) that the dogma of Jesus’ two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way,” Hick does not succeed in developing a strong enough case against the church’s orthodox and historical understanding of Jesus Christ to justify relinquishing it. Having failed to tear down the old, Hick lacks a proper foundation for his alternative Christology. I will demonstrate my thesis by showing the ways in which Hick’s arguments fail. As to his thesis “(3) that historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils,” I will not consider it as a matter of detailed evaluation due to the limited scope of this book and the overly pragmatic nature of such an argument.

I perceive this book as making a contribution to the field of religious studies to two important ways. First, as already mentioned, John Hick is one of the most significant religious thinkers of our time whose theological contributions in the area of pluralism need greater examination. Past studies of Hick’s thought on pluralism have tended to disproportionately focus on his philosophy to the neglect of his theology. Such lopsidedness is not surprising given Hick’s reputation as a philosopher, but given the crucial importance of Hick’s christological contributions in relation to pluralism, this book fills a gap. Secondly, many of the significant monographs that have been written on Hick’s theology of pluralism are of limited value to us today simply because they were done prior to the publication of *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. Gavin D’Costa’s *John Hick’s Theology of Religions*¹² and G. H. Carruthers’ *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Theocentric Model of the Christian Theology of Religions*¹³ are two cases in point. Gerald O’Collins’ article, “The Incarnation under Fire” in *Gregorianum*,¹⁴ and Stephen Davis’ chapter, “John Hick on Incarnation and Trinity,” in *The Trinity*,¹⁵ are two significant evaluations of Hick’s Christology that do critically engage Hick’s *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, but, as far as I am aware, no book- or a dissertation-length examination of Hick’s recent theology of pluralism is available as yet. I attempt to fill this gap with this book.

12. D’Costa, *John Hick’s Theology of Religions*.

13. Carruthers, *Uniqueness*.

14. O’Collins, “Incarnation Under Fire,” 263–80.

15. Kendall and O’Collins, eds., *Trinity*.

I shall proceed, then, as follows. In chapter 1, I shall begin by situating Hick's place within the world of religious pluralism. Here, I shall describe the pluralistic context in which we find ourselves today, the various problems such pluralism imposes on us, and the types of theological answers Christians have given in response. By briefly exploring his biography, I shall also attempt to locate Hick within this world of pluralism and his significance within it. In chapter 2, I will explore Hick's philosophy of pluralism, including his epistemology, metaphysical ontology, and ethical soteriology, in order to gain a general understanding of the philosophical framework from which Hick approaches his theology of religions. A brief evaluation of Hick's philosophy of pluralism will provide us with some preliminary foundation from which to assess his theology. Then in chapter 3, I shall present in some detail Hick's overall Christology, including his systematic attempts to deconstruct the church's traditional understanding of Christ, as well as his alternative reconstruction of a new Christology for a pluralistic age.

In chapter 4, I shall begin my evaluation of Hick's theology of pluralism by first assessing his argument that Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him. I shall demonstrate how Hick's methodology, claims about Jesus' filial consciousness, account of the resurrection, and claims about the church's creative role in the deification of Jesus fall short. Finally, in chapter 5, I shall evaluate Hick's thesis that the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way. By examining Hick's criticism of Morris' *two-minds* Christology and the various kenotic theories, I shall show the extent to which Hick's argument succeeds and fails.