

Evil and Religious Pluralism: The Eschatological Resolution

David Cheetham

When Antony Flew in the 1950's declared that religious assertions died 'a death of a thousand qualifications', he was expressing frustration in the face of a dogged refusal by theologians to relinquish cherished beliefs.¹ No matter what conundrum the atheist camp hurled at the theists, they found (to their considerable consternation) that the theologians had moved the goalposts just that little further away. Although the debate following Flew's comments addressed crucial questions concerning the meaningfulness of religious statements, it also highlighted, in my view, the durability and resilience of religious beliefs and assertions in the mind of the believer. Flew's point was that religious believers, despite being surrounded by confusing and contradictory evidence, refuse to give up their notions and convictions concerning the divine. It is this resilience in the face of cognitive and experiential difficulties that forms the background of the following discussion.

As part of this paper I will be briefly looking at John Hick's treatment of the problem of evil and be comparing this with his response to the problems of religious diversity. The purpose for such a comparison is not to provide an exhaustive look at these separate issues in relation to each other. Neither am I concerned to engage in recalcitrant hair-splitting regarding various ideas put forward by Hick. However, I will be showing how differently Hick has treated both problems and lead into a consideration of how the eschatological dimension of his thinking can result in a wholly different 'solution' to the question of religious diversity. I contend that the means are available to treat both questions in similar ways because of one highly significant factor—the possibility of further opportunities beyond death.

Let me begin by claiming that Hick's solution to the problem of evil is dissimilar to his solution to the problem of religious diversity. In the former he identifies (properly to my mind) that the solution to the problem of evil is closed related to the challenge given by Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?''²

Here the challenge would seem to be 'can you keep your view of God *intact* in relation to the existence of evil?', 'Is God really omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent if evil exists?' Thus, the questions of theodicy are concerned with the necessity to assert all such predications about God whilst acknowledging the existence and full horror of evil. Of course, not all theologians have been equally concerned to maintain the classical picture of the divine in the face of evil and suffering. Those of the process school in particular have decided to tackle the conundrum of evil by denying the problem as posed by Hume. For them, God is not wholly 'ultimate' but contingent and is struggling for self-disclosure. A notable exponent of process theology, David R. Griffin, has argued that God is limited in the sense that he is seeking to 'persuade' the creation towards the good purposes that he desires to see actualized.³ Griffin's theodicy proceeds from a method which looks at the situation in reality and then uses such observations to construct a particular conception of God. That is, Griffin is not seeking to 'defend' the concept of a wholly omnipotent, all-loving, personal God, but rather, he is allowing his own perception of the realities of existence to dictate his picture of God. Process theologians have therefore dissolved the problem of evil by adjusting their view of the divine in order to make God a co-sufferer in the universe. Nevertheless, it does appear that such views only affirm the strength of Hume's challenge and succumb to it simply because they have adjusted their view of God in honour of Hume's 'victory'.

Alternatively, Hick in his *Irenaean* theodicy undertakes a different strategy and prefers to uphold the view that God is limitlessly good and limitlessly powerful. To begin with, he writes:

Much depends, in the formation and criticism of theodicies, upon whether one starts from the pressing fact of evil in its many forms, and proceeds from this to develop a conception of God; or starts from a conviction as to the reality and goodness of God, derived from the stream of religious experience of which one is a part, and then asks whether the grim reality of evil is compatible with this.⁴

Hick prefers the latter approach. But if he upholds the view that God is limitlessly good and powerful he cannot, he feels, construct an adequate theodicy which restricts the human story to a single lifetime on earth. If he wanted to do that then perhaps he would (like the process school), have to somehow postulate a limit to divine fiat. So it seems that in upholding the view that God is limitlessly good and powerful, he opts for the only strategy that he sees as open to him—to extend the human journey beyond death.

He suggests that God has created a world in which there is authentic

freedom which facilitates an environment where souls can proceed freely towards salvation. This world is a 'vale of soul-making' where the various evils and afflictions that beset life are seen as somehow perfecting and moulding souls into God's likeness (*similitudo dei*). However, this perfecting process is rarely completed in a single lifetime. Thus, Hick suggests an *eschatological resolution*. He proposes that the human journey continues after death where there are further experiences and opportunities to be had which eventually bear good fruit and culminate in an experience of a limitlessly good end which renders all the preceding suffering to be justified.⁵ Unlike other contemporary thinkers, Hick is committed to a realist conception of life after death which means that he is not restricted to this present life when seeking out solutions to the theological problems of existence.

Now, let us turn to the problem of religious diversity. Firstly, let me employ the form of Hume's challenge in this context:

Is the *divine* 'Christian' only? then what about other religions? Has the *divine* revealed itself only in Christianity? then what about comparable religious experience elsewhere? If there are other religions and religious experiences comparable to the Christian experience then the *divine* cannot only be Christian and in fact the Christian God as traditionally conceived does not realistically exist.

This problem is addressed in an entirely different manner by Hick. He feels that he can no longer hold on to an exclusively Christian conception of God and has altered his picture of the divine. He proposes that there is an ultimate reality ('the Real' being Hick's preferred term) behind the different major faiths. This Real is to be understood as being neither personal or impersonal, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. Instead, it occupies a noumenal position far beyond the various phenomenal manifestations of it. All religions are therefore equally valid responses to the same Reality which lies behind them.⁶ The differences between the religions have come about not because there is a pantheon of differing and distinct diversities each concentrating on separate geographical locations, but because each culture has responded to the same Reality in their own characteristic ways. Hick also suggests that even at the level of the deepest mystical experiences there is no direct contact with ultimate reality—everything remains culturally dependent.⁷

Thus, Hick has steered clear of asserting the normative character of the Christian revelation in particular, the Christian God has become one of the 'many faces' of the Ultimate Reality behind it. Projecting forward beyond death, Hick suggests that as people progress towards union with Reality they will become increasingly aware that the divine was very

inadequately represented by the particular tradition that they had followed. He says that:

each of them [religious conceptions] will almost certainly turn out to be extremely inadequate as an account of what actually happens, so that all of these pictures will probably have to undergo considerable amendment, or radical reconstruction, in light of future post-mortem experience.⁸

So, there is, I suggest, a difference in the way Hick has approached evil and the way he has tackled religious pluralism. In the former, Hick did not tamper with traditional images of God and valiantly sought to preserve them. In the latter, Hick has pressed us to make adjustments to our assumptions concerning the particularity of the Christian revelation about God. He has not played his eschatological trump-card in the same way. But here is the core of the problem: We saw above that Hick rejected an approach to evil which sought first to evaluate and assess the realities of existence and then proceed to construct a conception of God. Instead, he preferred to follow a method which first assumed a particular conception of God and then sought to compatibilize the realities of our world with that conception. The reverse is true when he deals with the reality of religious diversity. That is, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis has not resulted from him receiving divine revelation as to its truth (the hypothesis itself does not allow this), rather, his hypothesis has stemmed from the cognitive and experiential pressures of a religiously diverse world. Furthermore, let me claim that the pluralistic hypothesis *denies* the problem of religious diversity in much the same way as the process theodocists deny the problem of evil. That is, the problem of evil is only a *problem* if there is some ultimately good and powerful being to be reconciled with evil in the world. It ceases to be a problem if we shrink the divine down to a contingent size. (Here we are not denying that evil and suffering are terrible things, but that the problem of evil is usually framed in the context of trying to compatibilize the notion of an all-loving, all-powerful God with the existence of evil.) Similarly, the actual diversities and differences of religions are overruled by the pluralistic hypothesis with its notion that the differences are only skin deep—they are all in fact equally in communion with the same absolute, there is no real diversity at the most fundamental levels. That is, it is no longer a question of trying to reconcile the truth-claims of a particular faith with the fact of religious diversity, but a denial that such truth-claims (which seem to constitute the *real* differences) have any significant weight.

One obvious complaint against my procedure here would be to say that there is a difference in Hick's treatment in these spheres simply

because they are *different* problems. But I am not so sure that this is clearly the case. If we look at both problems we can see that they are equally capable of presenting very searching and serious questions to faith. The two problems are in fact very much alike in the sense that they both level the charge that there are experiential and cognitive difficulties against holding certain beliefs. The presence of evil and suffering represents a profound challenge to our assumptions about the nature of God, it disquiets us whenever we come to meditate on the goodness of God and his benevolent purposes for humankind. Moreover, it can facilitate a prevention or undermining of faith in the sense that it initiates deep confusions and uncertainties. However, the challenge—'In light of these contradictory phenomena, can you keep your view of God intact?'—is not only applicable in the area of evil and suffering; it surely covers all areas that seem to put in jeopardy a total commitment to one's faith. After being firmly committed to the revelation of one particular faith, the believer is suddenly made uneasy by conflicting claims from other traditions. Such things threaten to undermine the conviction that something with universal and decisive finality has been directly touched within the revelation of one's faith. Indeed, is it possible that the existence of other religions presents just as powerful a critique of 'totally committed faith' as does the existence of starving children in Africa?

W. Cantwell Smith said that 'religious diversity poses a general human problem because it disrupts community'.⁹ However, it does much more than that. It does not just impinge at the social level but penetrates into the individual. It is a religious crisis for the individual and 'disrupts' certainty in faith. It raises questions that go deeper than the problems of social harmony within diversity; it intrudes at the deepest level—the human thirst for the absolute.

So, I would suggest that the phenomenon of religious diversity presents difficulties for those believers who desire to assert the supremacy of their particular faith, not out of arrogance, but because they have accepted a 'total life-stance'.¹⁰ For those believers who place a high premium on their faith being *absolutely* valid, the present pluralistic situation represents nothing less than a crisis. In this connection, Chester Gillis asks: 'Yet is it not important for the believer to consider definitive or absolute the revelation known to him or her, in order to be capable of total commitment?'¹¹ If the answer to Gillis' query is 'Yes', then a world which contains a plurality of incompatible truth-claims possesses the real potential to challenge the very roots of such total commitment. Thus, my contention is that the fact of conflicting truth-claims is all part of the deep uncertainty and confusion

that assails faith in our world. The fact of religious diversity casts into doubt the hope (and need) for something truly definitive and absolute in faith. The existence of a religiously diverse world together with competing truth-claims threatens to contradict this 'hope'; that is, the hope for the absolute. Many of the current advocates of the pluralistic hypothesis seem to think that religious faith should be able to quite easily evolve into a global spirituality and awareness of cultural relativity. For them, the present climate represents not a threat but an adventure. However, I think that they have overlooked an important factor that makes religious experience real and significant for the believer. David Hay in his book *Religious Experience Today* makes the following comments:

... religious experience is not the same thing as pious uplift or emotional self-indulgence or, I would add, beautiful rhetoric; it is much more like a direct confrontation with reality.¹²

Thus, there may be a sense that religious experience, at least in the perceptions of the believer, involves some kind of unmediated contact with the 'numinous'. This numinous experience (to employ Otto's phrase) constitutes something uniquely important in the eyes of the believer—it evokes something unconditional. P. Tillich wrote that 'the deep things must concern us always, because it matters infinitely whether we are grasped by them or not.'¹³ In religious experience we seek to break free of all that is transient and dependent, we endeavour to cut through the relativity of the post-Enlightenment world and take a Kierkegaardian leap of faith into the numinous. Thus it matters greatly that the God we have found in our experience is not just culturally dependent. If we say that nothing in our experience transcends the phenomenology of our culture then we have denied the felt necessity for the absolute in religious experience. John V. Taylor puts it this way:

Every profoundly convincing encounter with God is with a jealous God...the meaning of things conveyed by such an experience is of such moment that it must be seen to have universal relevance, and to deny this is to be false to the experience itself.¹⁴

We protect our faith, and guard it jealously. We invest our unconditional and total commitment into it—it is our 'ultimate concern' and we take such things seriously 'without any reservation'.¹⁵ Thus, the search for God is a search for something that transcends relativity and culture—that is the human need. If I find that my religion is like many other things—a mere reflection of my environment—then I have not broken into the numinous and I am still locked in the phenomenal world. Sensing that I have directly touched Reality is the only thing that can

really conjure up 'a feeling of absolute dependence'. I instinctively do not absolutely depend on things made from my own hands. I look beyond myself for guarantees.

Let me offer an analogy. Imagine a young eight-year old girl who writes a letter to the Queen and receives a reply. She is overwhelmed and awestruck that 'Her Majesty' has seen fit to reply to her letter and proudly shows all her family and friends. However her parents break the news to her that the reply was in fact written by a Lady-in-Waiting, and not by the Queen personally. There follows the inevitable disappointment on the girl's part who genuinely hoped and believed that she had actually corresponded with the Queen herself.

Leading on from this, imagine the effect on the religious believer who, fully committed to his/her faith, is told by Hick that s/he is not in direct communion with Reality but with one of its many faces. The pluralistic hypothesis seems to affirm that people are unable to enter into unmediated communion with the divine but can only project their own cultural image upon it. My point is that such assertions lead to a feeling of spiritual disappointment analogous to the little girl's disappointment above. Here I believe that I am echoing Tillich when he wrote: 'Why have men always asked for the truth? Is it because they have been disappointed with the surfaces, and have known that the truth which does not disappoint dwells below the surfaces in the depth?'¹⁶ The actual existence of a religiously diverse world threatens the need that something absolute and definitive with universal significance can be 'contacted' by an individual—there is perhaps a spiritual disappointment. Pluralist theories, like Hick's, compound such anxieties by underlining them.

Again, imagine a believer, racked with doubts, saying 'I have trouble believing that God is good because of all the suffering and evil in the world'. Say I replied: 'Indeed, you have good cause for concern! Such things evident in our world should persuade us towards embracing the view that the divine is good but also has occasional psychotic tendencies.' In what way would I have been sympathetic to her fears?! I suggest that saying 'I have trouble holding fast to my particular faith because of the claims of other religions' is *qualitatively* the same kind of thing as saying 'I have trouble believing that God is good because of all the evil and suffering in the world'. That is, they are both questions stemming from a deep anxiety regarding our convictions about God because of seemingly contradictory data. Additionally, it seems to me that in both cases the challenge is to tackle the problem whilst keeping a particular conception of God intact.

A plain objection to this is that the divine is greater than any of the

images we have of it. Indeed Tillich, whom I have quoted, famously said that 'faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous'.¹⁷ Thus, the pluralists' claim that there is an unobtainable reality beyond the various religious manifestations of it does have weight. Nevertheless, even though traditional Christianity has affirmed divine ineffability it is still supposed that God can be known analogically if not literally (Aquinas). Keith Ward concurs when he remarks that God's 'proper nature is not just totally other; it is greater than our concepts can reach, not less or such as to render them wholly inappropriate'.¹⁸ On top of all this, it may well be that the particularities of the different religious beliefs about the divine are extremely important to religious experience. In the mind of the believer such particularities may be inseparable from the 'numinous' or absolute itself.¹⁹

So how do we keep our view of God intact in view of the competing truth-claims that surround us? I claim that there is a door open to us if we seriously entertain the notion of *eschatological resolution*. Here we can recall Hick and his idea of further opportunities beyond death. Put simply, what I propose is that following death it will become apparent that one particular faith was the most faithful representation of ultimate reality. But, utilising Hick's idea of further development beyond death, we ought to say that such vindication of a particular faith will not serve as an indictment against people who held different beliefs during this present existence. This is perhaps the advantage of rejecting the reductionist view which denies the continuity of the person beyond death. Given the existence of an afterlife there are thus many more opportunities to solve problems that cannot be adequately addressed if we say that this present life is the only one. Alternatively, if we do assert that this life is the only life in which 'eternal decisions' can be made then it is possible that we destroy the moral coherency of our faith. If I cannot accept Hick's pluralistic proposals, his suggestion that there are further opportunities beyond death is something which I applaud.

Speculating further, I do not detect much *experiential* difference between Hick's eschatological proposals and my suggestions. To clarify this, let us consider the actual experiences of people, of a variety of faiths, in the *parieschaton*. Hick argues that in the immediate post-mortem world, persons from the various faiths will encounter the figures or experiences of their different eschatological expectations. However, as their journey proceeds, they will become aware of a much bigger picture; that is, they will recognise that behind their religious conceptions there is a common Reality which has manifested itself through these conceptions.²⁰ What are their impressions upon realising this? Maybe they will feel that they were mistaken in their beliefs,

particularly if they believed that their religion was normative—that is, it possessed the real, all-encompassing truth about reality; only to realise that theirs is just a part of a much larger and more comprehensive whole. So there is the possible sense that they will be found to be wrong, and that they must somehow come to terms with something which widely differs from their expectations. Now, the question I pose is: is this possible scenario any different, *in effect*, if one says that eventually it will be found that just one tradition was right and the others considerably mistaken? If Hick's pluralistic hypothesis says that all adherents to the various religions will eventually come to acknowledge something different from their own individual expectations, then the exclusivist, or inclusivist, proposals, in effect, suggest nothing substantially different from it. As I see it, the only real difference is that the nature of Reality will have been found to be faithfully represented by just one of the traditions, rather than by something that transcends them all. Patently, this would still be a form of exclusivism but it is not beset by the difficulties associated with the idea that this life represents the only chance to make the right choices. The notion of there being further opportunities beyond death means that a large part of humanity do not get passed over. Nobody is 'excluded' despite the exclusivity of truth. In this connection, Ward writes:

Religious believers do not have to suppose that the majority of the human race are excluded from salvation, as long as they have a view which allows for the development of knowledge after death. They are, however, committed to thinking that most people are mistaken in their beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality.²¹

To be fair, is not the assertion that 'only one faith is true' capable of causing just as much spiritual disappointment (for those not holding that faith) as the pluralistic idea that the divine cannot be directly 'touched' at all? In response to this it could be said that there is a difference as regards what each view is conveying to the believer. Even if we are claiming that only one faith is true there is at least the notion that human beings can find something absolute and definitive in this world. This is the meaning behind that Christian adage 'Seek and you shall find'—here is the promise of the absolute or numinous; searching for it may be long and arduous but direct contact with the divine can indeed be achieved, the religious quest can be rewarded. Alternatively, the pluralistic hypothesis must by its very nature deny this—everything must remain relatively ambiguous—we can never say or believe appropriate things about the absolute. There is no symbol, creed or vision that is 'concrete' in the sense that there is something that one can stake one's life on. The pluralistic hypothesis is bad news for the human quest for the absolute—

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God hides behind too many masks to be known in a meaningful or coherent way.

Flew, as we saw at the beginning, railed against the seemingly incomprehensible stubbornness of religious belief. It is this stubbornness that I think authentically characterises the human religious experience when it is sincerely felt that something absolutely real has been encountered in this world. By seeking to overrule such stubbornness with a pluralistic agenda we may be denying some of the most striking qualities of the religious quest. Equally, if we want to preserve the idea that the divine has been *definitively* revealed then for the sake of fairness we must extend the human journey beyond death for an eschatological resolution.

- 1 See A. Flew 'Theology and Falsification' in A. Flew & A. MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (SCM Press, 1955).
- 2 D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. M. Bell (Penguin, 1990), p. 108–109.
- 3 See D. Griffin 'Creation out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil' in ed. S. Davis, *Encountering Evil*, (T.& T. Clark, 1994), pp. 101–119.
- 4 J. Hick, 'Hick's Response to Critiques' in *Encountering Evil*, p. 63.
- 5 See J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (Macmillan, 1966; 2nd edn. 1977).
- 6 J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, (Macmillan, 1989) p. 246.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 294–295.
- 8 J. Hick in ed. H. Hewitt, *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion*, (Macmillan, 1991), p. 24–25.
- 9 W. Cantwell Smith 'The Christian in a Religiously Plural World' in eds. J. Hick & B. Hebblethwaite, *Christianity and Other Religions*, (Fount, 1980), p. 94. Taken from ed. W.G. Oxtoby, *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, (Harper & Row, 1976).
- 10 E. J. Sharpe describes such a 'total life-stance' as 'a totally explicit set of values which affect everything, in this world and (in its own terms) beyond it.' *Understanding Religion*, (Duckworth, 1992) p. 27.
- 11 C. Gillis in *Problems of the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 40.
- 12 D. Hay, *Religious Experience Today*, (Mowbray, 1990), p. 35.
- 13 P. Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (First published by SCM Press, 1949. Pelican, 1962) p. 67.
- 14 J.V. Taylor, 'The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue' in *Christianity and Other Religions*, p. 225. Originally delivered as the first Lambeth Interfaith Lecture on 2 November 1977.
- 15 P. Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 64.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 17 P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 52.
- 18 K. Ward, 'Truth and Religious Diversity', *Religious Studies*, 26, 1990, p. 7.
- 19 I discuss the need for further research into this aspect of religious experience in 'Religious Surveying: Commonality Between Traditions', *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. XVI No. 2, Autumn 1995.
- 20 See Part V 'A Possible Human Destiny' in J. Hick *Death and Eternal Life*, (Macmillan, 1985, 2nd edn.).
- 21 K. Ward, 'Truth and Religious Diversity', p. 18.