The Limits of Human Knowing:

A Critical Examination of John Hick’s Epistemology

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Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Kade Shean
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Abstract

This thesis attempts to engage with the material of John Hick, in light of recent scholarship, specifically focusing upon his epistemological foundation. It is committed to examine Hick and his critics in order to address the question: Does Hick’s epistemology form a solid foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis? To achieve this, the thesis will offer insight into how John Hick employs Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical insights as a basis for his epistemology, and how Hick develops these theories of cognition into a foundational aspect of his major philosophical schema. It seeks to understand how Hick’s hypothesis relies on his epistemological claims and how they are employed as a basis for his pluralistic hypothesis.

This thesis attempts to describe, and subsequently critique, Hick’s basic assumptions by addressing three main questions:

1) What are John Hick’s epistemological assumptions that he employs as a foundation for his philosophical exercise?

2) How do they function as a foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis?

3) Is Hick’s interpretation and application of Kant’s epistemology well-reasoned and valid?

By doing so, this thesis will establish that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is irretrievably linked to his Kantian base. Hick’s soteriological, Christological, and philosophical conclusions will be established as a natural result of his epistemology. As such, this thesis establishes that any acceptance of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis must constitute an acceptance of his epistemological assumptions. Furthermore, it demonstrates that an acceptance of Hick’s epistemological claims offers a strong defence against critiques of his ultimate philosophical conclusions.
Chapter 1

Introduction to the Thesis

1.1 Introduction

The body of work that John Hick has authored, edited or otherwise contributed to the field of philosophy of religion is significant, so much so that any attempt to grapple with the issue of religious diversity will find him impossible to ignore. Over the years he has established himself as a scholar who is willing to tackle difficult problems and adopt a non-traditional stance regarding long-held ideas. His critique of the doctrine of the Incarnation and his championing of religious pluralism has stimulated a significant amount of discussion regarding how Christianity sees its own position in a pluralistic world. When it comes to a discussion of interreligious dialogue any budding scholar in the field must deal with his work one way or another.

This thesis will investigate Hick’s philosophical observations of religious plurality. To do so, it will examine the underlying assumptions that underpin his pluralistic hypothesis—his most significant and, perhaps, most divisive project. With his hypothesis, Hick attempts to demonstrate that the varied major religious traditions are reflective of a common source of religious experience. Similarly, he highlights that they maintain common soteriological themes and processes that function to direct their worshippers towards a similar soteriological end-point—a state that he entitles “Reality-centeredness.” As such, in spite of the theological and dogmatic differences evidenced in these religious traditions, Hick

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2 A prime example of the influence that Hick has had on the field of Philosophy of Religion can be found in John Hick, Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). This volume highlights a number of different contemporary conversations taking place around Hick’s body of work, including his responses. Of particular interest to the claim that Hick plays a significant role in the promotion of religious pluralism is Cardinal Ratzinger’s pronouncement naming him as one of the “founders and most eminent representatives” of what he concludes is one of the greatest challenges facing Christianity in the modern setting (Hick, Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion, 157).
asserts that all represent veridical pathways to salvation and liberation of the human person. What are of special interest to this thesis are the epistemological observations that Hick employs in order to underpin his theological conclusions.

This chapter will delineate how Hick’s epistemological foundation will be explored over the course of this thesis. Crucially, it will also justify why an examination of Hick’s epistemology is of value. The environment that gave rise to, and directly influenced, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis will be addressed to highlight Hick’s starting point. Of critical concern to any examination of Hick’s epistemology is establishing the core Kantian distinction at the heart of his exercise. To demonstrate this Kantian leaning, this chapter will briefly engage with the Kantian themes immediately apparent within Hick’s philosophical exercise. Finally, this chapter will offer a breakdown of the major methodological processes that we will employ in order to address our thesis question, and the major pieces of literature that will contribute to our investigation.

### 1.2 A Response to Religious Superiority

Traditional Christian claims have historically been challenged by changes within the currents of philosophy and understanding of the natural world. Just as these challenges have demanded a response, so too must theology respond to the existence of many different religious traditions that each claim an authentic understanding of transcendent truth. Each tradition possesses its own understanding of the correct mode of being a human person—one that is often in conflict with the accounts of the other traditions. As a result of this changing global environment, it is only right that Christianity attempts to re-examine how it conceptualises its own position in relation to non-Christian traditions. There are many potential responses to this reality, from a traditionalist view that claims there can be no salvation (to use Christian terminology) outside the framework of a particular tradition, to the much more universal perspective found within the various pluralist

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Each response has one major, common element. Each must examine the authenticity in which non-Christian traditions are reflective of transcendental Reality.

John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis stands at the centre of a significant body of scholarship that challenges, reaffirms and critiques the pluralist response to religious diversity. As such, Hick has been pronounced as one of the most influential, radical, and provocative proponents of the pluralist response to the account of religious diversity. It becomes clear in The Problems of Religious Pluralism that the significance that Hick attributes to the problem stems from an awareness of the social issues that arise from religious diversity. Hick addresses these intellectually via his pluralistic hypothesis, but it is this critical, practical dimension that demonstrates the significant importance of Hick’s body of work.

Due to the increasingly global nature of the contemporary world, Christians are being exposed to many different traditions and cultures they had previously been isolated from. No longer are non-Christian religious traditions distant, abstract concepts. They have become realities, experienced in daily life, even within the predominantly Christian, Western world. Hick observes that these encounters may be the catalyst for conflict, much of which is justified in religious claims. The practical issue of religiously motivated violence may be the most visible example, but it is a symptom of an attitude of superiority that is present within major traditions. In practice, the majority of contemporary Christians observe that it is perfectly acceptable for non-Christians to practice their own traditions.

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7 There are many different ways of understanding the myriad responses to religious plurality, and Paul Knitter puts forward a comprehensive account of contemporary positions with No Other Name?. However, they are often understood according to the three-fold typology of Alan Race presented in Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions (London, UK: SCM, 1983). For simplicity’s sake, Race’s language will be employed despite valid concerns as to its sufficiency—such as those expressed in Gavin D’Costa’s “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions” (Religious Studies 32, no. 2 (June 1996): 223).


9 Knitter, No Other Name?, 147-48.

10 In Hick’s description of the significant social problem that was taking place in the United Kingdom, he asserted that racial hatred of this kind was often founded and justified via a religious motivation. However, this is only the most extreme expression of the position of religious and cultural superiority that was expressed during that period (Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 5).

11 Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 9, personally observed some of the consequences of interreligious conflict during the mid-twentieth century. While it was initially racially motivated, the violence and hate-speech that stemmed from this increased encounter with the other was often justified by a claim to protect Christian civilisation.
However, within this mindset, these traditions are often not acknowledged to be valid pathways to salvation and Christianity is still held to be the normative religious perspective. This creates a dynamic within society that sees religious traditions existing peacefully, side by side, while each group holds their own religious tradition as superior to those of their neighbours.

It is this attitude of superiority that potentially results in the dehumanisation of the other. As such, this absolutist perspective that sees one’s own tradition as the comprehensive explanation of transcendental truth invariably becomes a barrier to any kind of empathy or dialogue between religious groups. Hick attempts to combat this superiority by reinventing the Christian conception of its place within the world of varied religious traditions. It is perfectly reasonable that the individual worshipper sees their own tradition as superior; it is a natural development from familiarity with the perspectives and practices within each tradition’s religio-cultural context. However, the tension between traditions seems to largely stem not from this natural superiority, but from the distinct claim of superior authenticity. It is not this natural superiority that Hick challenges, or even Christian claims and practice, but how Christians see themselves in relationship with other traditions, and the attitudes that these claims inspire. His philosophical framework represents an exercise in religious humility, highlighting the flawed nature of the human person with regard to conceptualising the Ultimate.

Religious claims only become problematic when they are attributed a transcendental authority that is exclusive or superior to those of other religious traditions. For Hick, this is a significant issue that needs to be addressed, as this attitude functions as a significant barrier to any kind of fruitful dialogue. Harold Netland observes that the exclusivist position (that which Hick refers to as the traditional position) has historically been employed as

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13 Hick emphasises these barriers by delineating how religious superiority is used to justify the committal of evils by, and against, human persons (John Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul Knitter (New York: Orbis, 1987), 17.)

14 It goes beyond the Western culture and imperialism inherent in both. Or at least, maybe, that is what they have in common. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 50, attributes this claim of superiority as one born of familiarity to a practitioner’s own tradition and culture.

justification for acts of violence and intolerance towards other non-Christians.\textsuperscript{16} However, this is not merely a historical phenomenon. Hick observes that this religiously motivated intolerance is still manifest in contemporary society, asserting that “we live as part of a worldwide human community that is at war with itself.”\textsuperscript{17} The claim to exclusive access to religious truth at the core of the exclusivist position functions to underpin justifications of religious violence.

Harold Netland strongly opposes any claim that would present the exclusivist position as synonymous with intolerance.\textsuperscript{18} Hick, similarly, observes no \textit{causal} link between exclusivism and religious violence, but highlights that exclusivism \textit{allows} for justification of such acts; the source of violence may be the natural human propensity for self-centeredness, but it finds its justification in religious claims that exclude and marginalise.\textsuperscript{19} Michael Barnes asserts that if Christianity is presented as normative, or as possessing superior access to truth, other religious traditions are placed in an inferior position and their fundamental religious claims are called into question.\textsuperscript{20} This lack of equality, in turn, creates a significant barrier for dialogue.

Paul Knitter observes that any attempt to see human persons from different traditions and engage them in dialogue is doomed to failure if one cannot see their perspective as equally valid as one’s own. He equates the conversation to one between a cat and a mouse. “Not only is the cat the pre-established winner, but also it will be difficult for the cat, during the dialogue, really to listen and learn from the mouse, especially when the mouse says something that does not fit the cat's ‘last word.’”\textsuperscript{21} Hans Küng contends that the cause of religious conflict stems from a lack of \textit{egalitarian} dialogue between different religious perspectives. For Küng, religious conflict stems from a lack of perceived equality and a peaceful and prosperous relationship between the world’s religious traditions is

\textsuperscript{18} Netland, “Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth,” 80-81.
\textsuperscript{19} Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity,” 17.
foundational to a peaceful, global society. As such, according to Küng, inequality between religious traditions functions to contribute to religious conflict as the processes for avoiding intolerances are hindered by a perspective that does not see religious traditions as equal.

1.3 The Value of Examining Hick’s Epistemology

Perry Schmidt-Leukel highlights that the pluralist response stems from a view that the traditional position falls short of satisfactorily presenting non-Christian traditions. By promoting a perspective of religious equality, pluralism acts to address the perception that another religious tradition is inferior when grounded in an observation of irreconcilable truth claims. Hick employs his own epistemology to offer an explanation as to how conflicting truth claims arise in response to religious experience. Each tradition offers a different understanding of human relationality to the Real; each possesses different truth claims, views, practices, and traditions that are irreconcilable with those of other traditions. With his epistemology, Hick attempts to demonstrate that each worshipper must understand their own tradition as only possessing a limited conception of Ultimate Reality. William Rowe asserts that, in the face of this epistemological limitation, there are only three possible responses. 1) All traditions false and none are valid; 2) one is true but it is impossible to determine which one; or 3) all are equally valid as they all are reflections of valid religious encounter with transcendental Reality. Hick’s framework builds upon his epistemological starting point and attempts to argue Rowe’s third position. For Hick, all major religious traditions are reflections of Ultimate Reality, but each tradition describes and interprets these encounters in a limited way, coloured by their cultural lens.

However, the theological and dogmatic differences found within the great religious traditions are often irreconcilable and this disparity cannot simply be ignored. If religious traditions are said to be equal, or to possess an equally valid claim to religious truth, then the issue of irreconcilable propositional claims must be addressed. Surely, if two religions

adopt opposing positions on a subject, one position must inherently possess more truth than the other? Hick attempts to circumvent this issue by highlighting the limited scope of human knowledge. Rather than trying to reconcile these claims, he attempts to offer an explanation to account for the conflicting nature of religious claims while maintaining their fidelity. His perspective is not only novel, but it also stimulates a significant amount of discussion as to whether non-Christian religious traditions can claim to possess the same access to Ultimate Reality as found within the Christian tradition. As such, the importance of addressing Hick’s hypothesis becomes readily apparent.

This places all the great religious traditions on equal footing; they are all equally correct, in that their perspectives are equally representative of how Ultimate Reality has been revealed to them. Similarly, they are all equally mistaken in that their claims fall short of capturing the essence of Ultimate Reality and expressing it authentically. As a result, no one tradition can claim that its metaphysical propositions stem from a more authentic encounter of transcendent Reality. In light of this, and building upon Hick’s epistemological claim, non-Christian religious traditions must be understood to possess as great a claim to transcendent truth as Christianity itself. All possess equally convincing claims to be founded in the experience of Ultimate Reality. As a result, for Hick, one should treat other traditions with the same deference and respect as one treats their own.

Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis represents the natural end-of-the-road for Hick’s commitment to religious pluralism. It represents an exercise in humility, attempting to offer a meeting place between the world religions by highlighting human finitude. It rationalises

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27 John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 110, highlights that the irreconcilable truth claims of the various traditions offer a significant barrier. Truth in one’s own tradition becomes justification to believe that all other traditions’ claims are false.

28 Hick’s hypothesis offers an explanation as to how religious diversity can be understood as varied yet still veridical and soteriologically effective. – David Cheetham, *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 135.


32 Schmidt-Leukel, “Pluralist theologies,” 56, contends that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is an example of an attempt to establish a framework that allows for a parity of religions without succumbing to a relativistic perspective that sees all religions equally valid.
how otherwise irreconcilable truth claims can still be seen as authentic without being understood as superior, or absolute, when weighed against the claims of the others. When viewed this way, no one religion can claim superior or exclusive access to the truth.\(^{33}\) Examining Hick’s entire pluralistic framework would be an exhaustive exercise and well beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, the epistemological understanding that Hick employs as the basis for his philosophical framework will constitute the main focus of this thesis as Hick’s framework and many of his theological conclusions are a direct result of this underlying premise.

### 1.4 The Presence of Kant within Hick’s Framework

Hick highlights that his perspective is a religious one.\(^{34}\) Hick adopts a lens as a believer, offering an account that does not emphasise a naturalistic perspective or attempt to grapple with the anthropological dimension of religious pluralism.\(^{35}\) However, it must be established that the tools Hick employs to construct his pluralistic framework are distinctly non-religious ones. His conclusions are drawn from a philosophical evaluation of religious phenomena, understood as they are, in light of his epistemic claims.\(^{36}\) Thus, despite his religious lens, Hick’s end point and his theological conclusions find themselves invariably underpinned by a philosophical premise.

This premise stems from the basic insight that the human person is significantly limited in their capacity to cognise transcendental experience. Hick asserts that any encounter of transcendental Reality would be subject to this limitation. As a result, genuine religious encounters become subjective interpretations as human finitude acts to hinder all efforts to accurately conceptualise the essence of transcendental Reality.\(^{37}\) Experience can only be understood within the framework of the experiencer. In order to describe this disparity between transcendental Reality and the limited human experience of it, Hick


\(^{34}\) Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 1.

\(^{35}\) Cheetham, John Hick, 100.


employs the epistemic insight of Immanuel Kant. Rather than founding his philosophical conclusions on metaphysical claims, Hick bases his entire project on Kant’s account of the limitation of human capacity for objective knowledge. This philosophical framework is constructed to elucidate just how religious experience functions for the human person. It is Hick’s understanding of human experience, as this thesis will demonstrate, that forms the most essential component of his pluralistic hypothesis.

This thesis will demonstrate that this distinction forms the core epistemological foundation for Hick’s mature body of work. The Kantian epistemic insight that Hick employs allows for a claim not only that there is a disparity between transcendental Reality and how it is experienced by the human person, but also how many different encounters of the same Reality can spawn so many different results. With the value of examining the epistemological foundation of Hick’s hypothesis established, this chapter will highlight the methodology that will be employed in order to attempt to answer the question: “Do Hick’s epistemological assumptions form a solid foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis?”

1.5 Methodology

With Hick’s emphasis on the human interpretive element at the core of his hypothesis, it becomes clear that an understanding of how the human person experiences is important to understanding Hick’s philosophical exercise. This demonstrates why obtaining a grasp of the epistemological foundations that exist at the core of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is essential in any examination of Hick’s pluralist perspective. It will be made clear through the arguments presented in this thesis that Hick’s theological conclusions result directly from Hick’s core, foundational, epistemic claims.

Hick’s thought develops significantly over time and, as such, it would be worthwhile to examine the development of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis in a narrative structure. However, this thesis will adopt the perspective outlined by some scholars that Hick’s

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epistemological foundation remains consistent throughout the development of his philosophical exercise. Given this, Hick’s body of work will be treated as a unified whole as little will be gained by examining its development chronologically.

From the brief discussion this thesis has attempted as to the value of Hick’s epistemological foundation, three major questions arise: 1) What are John Hick’s epistemological assumptions that he employs as a foundation for his philosophical exercise? 2) How do they function as a foundation for his theological conclusions? and 3) Is Hick’s interpretation and application of Kant well-reasoned and valid? By examining these three elements this thesis will establish that Hick’s theological conclusions and, in fact, his whole pluralistic exercise, are irretrievably linked to his neo-Kantian base. By doing so, it will answer the overall thesis question in the affirmative.

The first point will be addressed over the course of the Chapter 2. This chapter will seek to delineate how Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction is understood and applied within Hick’s understanding of religious experience. This thesis will establish that Hick’s use of the Kantian distinction ensures that phenomenal religious experience may be understood as derived from the noumenal Real while the resulting religious claims remain unable to authentically capture the “essence” of Ultimate Reality. This offers us an adequate starting point to move forward in our examination of Hick’s epistemology and how, building upon his Kantian base and armed with his perspective that all religious traditions hold validity and merit, Hick constructs his pluralistic hypothesis to overcome the conflicting claims at the core of the disparate religious traditions.

To establish how Hick’s epistemological assumptions function within his body of work this thesis will survey a number of major themes within Hick’s thought that are integral to his pluralistic perspective and highlight how the epistemological assumptions, outlined in Chapter 1, function to underpin them. The third chapter will primarily focus on the

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40 Christopher Sinkinson offers a perspective that Hick’s body of work is saturated in Kantian themes, arguing that Hick’s neo-Kantian approach underpins his early thought through to his mature philosophical framework. Sinkinson, The Universe of Faiths, 32, highlights that even within Faith and Knowledge (one of Hick’s earliest works, published in 1957) Hick relied on Kant to highlight the critical disparity between the thing as it is and the thing experienced by the experient. This observation appears elsewhere, evidenced within David Cheetham, John Hick, 6, in which he highlights that, although the conclusions he draws continue to develop and adapt in response to critique and insufficiencies in his thought, ultimately Hick’s epistemological assumptions that form his foundation remain uniform.
Christological and soteriological conclusions Hick reaches through observation and application of his epistemological insight. This will establish that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is intimately linked to his epistemological foundation and will demonstrate that it is present throughout Hick’s major themes.

In order to address the third arising question—“Is Hick’s interpretation and application of Kant well-reasoned and valid?”—the question itself must be broken down into its constitutive elements. For establishing if Hick’s use of Kant is well-reasoned we must examine Kant himself and how critiques of his epistemological claim can act to hinder Hick’s use as a foundation. Following this, it is important to examine critiques of how Hick interprets Kant’s epistemology; if Hick’s reading is not in line with Kant then the validity of its use as a basis for Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis must be called into question. Finally, the thesis will need to address how Hick employs his Kantian foundation as a starting point for his mature pluralistic framework.

As a result of this exercise, this thesis will demonstrate that Hick employs his neo-Kantian base as a solid foundation for his pluralistic framework. However, it will demonstrate that this Kantian epistemology is inseparable from the pluralistic hypothesis; Hick’s comprehensive framework requires the Kantian insight to function and, as such, a rejection of this foundation will render the hypothesis invalid. As such, this thesis will critically examine Hick’s framework to establish its validity and how the Kantian distinction functions to underpin and justify it as a valid understanding of religious diversity.

1.6 Literature Review

This literature review will function to introduce major texts that will be integral in our examination of Hick’s epistemological foundation. It serves to demonstrate their usefulness and relevance to this thesis’ main argument. The works mentioned in this literature review will then be employed in the following three chapters alongside Hick’s primary sources in order to address our main thesis.

Christopher Sinkinson’s *The Universe of Faiths: A Critical Study of John Hick’s Religious Pluralism* offers an excellent starting point for this examination. It agrees with one of this thesis’ main assumptions: that Hick’s body of work is largely unified by his use of the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction. In fact, Sinkinson attributes to Hick a Kantian character far beyond that which Hick acknowledges. \(^{41}\) Gavin D’Costa describes *The Universe of Faiths* as “one of the most thorough and perceptive critical examinations of the influential work of John Hick that [he] has read.” \(^{42}\) As such, Sinkinson’s thorough investigation, and his unique perspective, would be valuable in any investigation of Hick’s body of work. However, it is especially relevant to an examination of Hick’s Kantian epistemology.

This is especially pronounced in Sinkinson’s comparison between Hick and Kant. He analyses their justification for belief in an Ultimate Reality and how they understand the human person’s relationship with the Real. \(^{43}\) This proves to be of significance in this thesis’ examination of the noumenal Real within Hick’s philosophical framework. Ultimately, Sinkinson comes to the conclusion that acceptance of Hick’s epistemological foundation would sign a “death warrant” for all existing religious traditions. \(^{44}\) It marks God as unknowable, as beyond human conception, comprehension, and reach.

This becomes valuable in our final examination of the validity of Hick’s use of the Kantian distinction as it challenges the practicality of such an approach. What use is a universal account of a universe of faiths when it renders faiths invalid? As such, Sinkinson’s scholarly work will provide ample discussion points and critiques across Hick’s body of work with a special focus on his epistemology.

However, Sinkinson provides evidence in favour of viewing Hick’s body of work as a philosophical exercise rather than a comprehensive theological framework. He engages in the discourse between Gerard Loughlin and Michael Barnes to establish that Hick’s

\(^{41}\) Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*, 102.


\(^{43}\) Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*, 102.

\(^{44}\) Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*, 176.
Christology was only tangential to his philosophical program.\textsuperscript{45} It represented a logical endpoint for some of Hick’s epistemological assumptions rather than bearing any kind of relevance to Christian theology which offers valuable perspectives in an examination of Hick’s Christology and language of metaphor. This highlights how Hick is one-step-removed from theology, and Sinkinson asserts that “the force of this argument seems so overwhelming that it leads me to suggest that not only is Hick not properly understood as a Christian theologian, but that he has never been one.”\textsuperscript{46} Sinkinson marks the development of Hick’s body of work as a departure first from Christianity, then from religion altogether, into a philosophical exercise. Hick’s claim that Christians should not regard themselves as the only true path towards transcendental truth cements this, in Sinkinson’s mind, with Hick’s work developing from Christian, to comparative theology, to secular philosophical framework. Over the course of The Universe of Faiths Sinkinson paints a picture divorced from any kind of Christian underpinning whose argument is entirely reliant on a Kantian account of reality.

1.6.2 Mathis, Terry Richard. \textit{Against John Hick: An Examination of His Philosophy of Religion}. Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1985

Terry Richard Mathis examines Hick’s understanding of religious language. By examining the cognitive or non-cognitive status of religious language, Mathis attempts to establish that Hick’s justification of eschatological verification is unnecessary. Here, Mathis attempts to demonstrate that “neither of the factors that supposedly necessitate eschatological verification does so.”\textsuperscript{47} At length, he delineates Hick’s philosophical position to construct a framework within which to examine his justification for the fact-asserting nature of religious language. This serves to underpin this thesis’ examination of religious language, religious experience, and how they function within Hick’s framework.

Regarding religious language, Hick observes that it should be cognitive, or fact asserting, and Mathis acts to critically deconstruct Hick’s argument to that end. Mathis

\textsuperscript{45} Sinkinson, \textit{The Universe of Faiths}, 30.
\textsuperscript{46} Sinkinson, \textit{The Universe of Faiths}, 30.
\textsuperscript{47} Terry Richard Mathis, \textit{Against John Hick: An Examination of His Philosophy of Religion} (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1985), 69.
serves to aid in an examination of Hick’s assertion that religious experience is both ambiguous and cognitive, and in drawing these two seemingly incompatible attributes into tension.  

If Mathis’ arguments against Hick’s foundational insights are convincing, then the central thesis that Hick’s epistemology forms a solid foundation for his pluralistic framework is similarly disproved. Mathis’ argument offers a valuable counter-point to the central argument of this thesis.

Mathis directly addresses Hick’s use of the noumenal/phenomenal distinction as a foundation in his body of work and how he applies it to religious experience. Mathis concludes that “unless Hick can 1) account for the differences between ordinary and religious types of experiences, and 2) substantiate his view in the role of sense data, he has no basis for believing that his account of religious experiences is veridical.”

By rejecting Hick’s Kantian base as non-veridical, Mathis asserts that Hick’s eschatological verification is not necessary. While Mathis demonstrates the Kantian base at the core of Hick’s thought, he also demonstrates how a rejection of Hick’s epistemology renders much of his thought unnecessary, which will prove to be central to this thesis’ argument. Ultimately, Mathis finds that Hick is unable to justify his Kantian perspective, but also that his propositional claim of a single, noumenal, divine Reality is in direct contradiction to his concept of religious ambiguity. Mathis finds that Hick “does not have the justification for the kind of theistic claims he wants to make.”

As such, Mathis offers a compelling critique of many of the dimensions of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis. This thesis will engage with Mathis’ understanding of religious experience, the Kantian epistemology employed by Hick, and the insufficiency of Hick’s epistemology in supporting his theological arguments.

1.6.3 Gillis, Chester. *A Question of Final Belief: An Analysis and Critique of the Soteriology of John Hick*. New York, St Martin’s, 1986

*A Question of Final Belief* investigates Hick’s perspective on salvation within the contemporary pluralistic landscape. To achieve this, Chester Gillis explores the

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48 Mathis, Against John Hick, 75.
49 Mathis, Against John Hick, 95.
50 Mathis, Against John Hick, ix.
epistemological underpinning that supports John Hick’s understanding of religious experience and religious language. Ultimately, Gillis brings Hick’s epistemological underpinning into question by examining the results of his philosophical exercise and his reliance on his Kantian base.

Gillis addresses the tension between religious ambiguity and fact-asserting status of religious language. “If one holds that religious statements are meant to be factual, however, then interreligious dialogue will have to be viewed through the prism of the truth claims of the different religions, which often conflict.” This examination offers significant insight into Hick’s use of the Kantian distinction to overcome the seeming conflict between conflicting truth claims and the factual core of religious language within Hick’s philosophical exercise. However, Gillis highlights that Hick’s body of work is distinct from Kant’s; Hick offers a developed argument for his epistemological positions, focused on the validity of religious belief, but his insights go beyond the original bounds of Kant’s. As Hick’s epistemology is founded on a Kantian premise, this becomes significant in any examination of Hick’s epistemological claims.

According to Gillis, religious experience is critical to understanding Hick’s epistemology. He explores the concept of cognition in presence and in absence that Hick describes with his Wittgenstein-influenced account of experience. This use of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of seeing-as is one of the most distinctive elements of Hick’s epistemology, and is essential to constructing an account of human cognition of religious experience. This allows for Gillis to focus on his primary question: “How does religious language disclose the truth (if it does)?” It is clear from Gillis’ examination that understanding Hick’s interpretation of religious language is important to understanding Hick’s epistemological foundation. It shapes all theological and philosophical exercises within his framework as the status of religious language affects how propositional claims

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52 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 32.
53 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 43.
54 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 52.
55 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 59.
56 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 59.
can be understood, within religious traditions, as a response to first-order religious encounter.

Gillis seems to challenge Hick’s understanding of a pluralistic universe that sees all religious experience stemming from the one transcendental Reality. Instead, for Gillis, Hick is instead attempting to reconcile his own Christian perspective with the perspectives of others. He highlights that Hick employs a Christian understanding of transcendental Reality, and employs Christian criteria when examining salvation and ethics. Ultimately, Gillis concludes that Hick is not really a pluralist at all, but his philosophical framework constitutes a form of inclusivism.57 This account will prove to be significantly valuable as this thesis explores the theistic character of Hick’s philosophical framework and whether this theistic character violates the concept of religious ambiguity that he arrives at via his epistemological foundation.


Gavin D’Costa offers a systematic examination of Hick’s major arguments in support of his philosophical framework. Specifically, he engages with those that call for a re-evaluation of Christianity’s position in relation to non-Christian religious traditions. He explores seven separate, major arguments. This review will briefly examine those arguments that are relevant to this thesis, and highlight why they suit our purposes.

Argument four pertains to Hick’s opposition to a “traditional Christology.” Hick argues that the traditional image of Christ is erroneous. It serves as an amalgamation of many different images of Jesus, projected from the believer through a desire for a personal saviour, and doesn’t consider the body of world religions.58 This last point is the one that D’Costa strongly argues against. Furthermore, D’Costa argues that Hick’s arguments become self-contradictory when examined through the lens of his Kantian epistemology, even going so far as to claim that Hick himself adopts a Ptolemaic position under the guise of a

57 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 174.
58 Gavin D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 120.
theocentric, Copernican revolution.\textsuperscript{59} Similar to Gillis’ observation of Hick’s position, this offers an excellent point of challenge to Hick’s claim of religious ambiguity.

Argument five explores the nature of religion and religious history, specifically demonstrating Hick’s indebtedness to Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Hick makes an argument in support of a Copernican shift as proposed by Smith, which would do away with any questions as to which religion can claim exclusive or superior access to truth.\textsuperscript{60} Hick uses this perspective to argue against a systematised view of religion in which different traditions maintain opposing theological claims. Rather, he proposes that religious practice be seen as a dynamic continuum “within which intersections of divine grace, divine initiative, divine truth, with human faith, human response, human enlightenment take place.”\textsuperscript{61} Hick claims that the opposing nature of religious ideologies in competition with each other for the souls of humanity is a modern construct and actually acts as a burden to faith and was not the original intention of the founders of the great religious traditions.\textsuperscript{62} D’Costa claims that taken to its logical conclusion this implies that religious language may be reduced to subjectivist expressionism without any real reference. But Hick disputes this. For Hick, even though the language of the Incarnation is mythological, it clearly has ontological import. D’Costa sees this as meaning that the God of universal love requires grounding in a normative Christology.\textsuperscript{63} Again, D’Costa returns to the claim that Hick’s theocentricity is firmly rooted in his Christian background.

The seventh argument that D’Costa examines is Hick’s argument from the perspective of infinite divine nature. This deals with Hick’s use of Kantian epistemology to specifically overcome the problems of conflicting truth claims and how Hick understands the different modes of experiencing Divine Reality in relation to one another. D’Costa argues that Hick’s Real, when closely analysed, introduces and possibly perpetuates a genuine ambiguity at the heart of the Copernican revolution.\textsuperscript{64} It is undermined by his own Kantian foundation, rather than supported by it, which offers an excellent point to examine in light of our thesis.

\textsuperscript{59} D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 109.
\textsuperscript{60} D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 60.
\textsuperscript{61} D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 61.
\textsuperscript{62} D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 64.
\textsuperscript{63} D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 120.
\textsuperscript{64} D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 162.
question. As such, D’Costa’s examination offers a wealth of material for examining Hick’s epistemological foundation, especially in regard to how it is expressed in his philosophical and theological conclusions.

1.7 Concluding Notes

This chapter functions to outline how this thesis will examine Hick’s neo-Kantian epistemology and how it underpins his philosophical and theological conclusions. It has become clear that Hick offers a unique response to the issue of religious plurality, with his starting point founded on the social issues that arise from interreligious and intercultural conflicts. However, while his starting point does stem from conflict, with cultural superiority as its face, it becomes equally clear that his account is an attempt to overcome the theological issues of conflicting religious truth claims. His account is not grounded socially, culturally or historically. Instead, it finds its basis in the flawed nature of the human person and their incapacity to conceptualise Ultimate Reality. What is key in Hick’s approach is that he is not combatting or attempting to relativise the claims of religious traditions but is instead attempting to offer an explanation as to how they can be understood as simultaneously veridical and different.

Hick is significantly influential and the value of examining his body of work is clear. However, due to the scope of this thesis, this examination must be significantly limited. As such, how his basic epistemology functions as a valid counterpoint to an interreligious response that sees other religious perspectives as possessing inferior access to the truth must be the sole focus. However, as this epistemology functions to underpin the entirety of Hick’s philosophical framework, this examination hopes to prove to be extremely valuable in demonstrating the validity of Hick’s philosophical argument.
Chapter 2

Hick’s Epistemology

2.1 Introduction

How Hick perceives understands religious experience for the common person acts as an excellent starting point for an examination of his epistemological foundation. For Hick, religious experience forms the epicentre of religious practice and his epistemology functions to describe how that experience is cognised and responded to by the human person. As such, an investigation of Hick’s epistemology also necessitates an examination of his religious understanding; it is foundational to understanding how Hick’s epistemology underpins his philosophical exercise.\(^{65}\) Such an examination will provide the starting point for the present chapter as we attempt to address the question: “What are John Hick’s epistemological assumptions that he employs as a foundation for his philosophical exercise?”

This chapter will examine Hick’s understanding of personal religion and religious traditions to provide a landscape within which to begin our investigation into Hick’s epistemology. Upon coming to a conclusion regarding this central perspective, this chapter will seek to demonstrate how Kantian thought is employed as a basis for Hick’s pluralist perspective. This will constitute an examination of the noumenal/phenomenal distinction and its importance in Hick’s body of work. This examination will establish that, by employing the Kantian distinction as a core epistemological claim in his philosophical perspective, Hick naturally reaches the conclusion that the world is religiously ambiguous. To conclude, an examination of Wittgenstein’s seeing-as will be conducted to establish how it functions within Hick’s framework. Specifically, this chapter will elucidate how Hick justifies going beyond Wittgenstein’s original scope to describe the function of all experience. In doing so, this thesis will demonstrate that Hick offers a comprehensive and sound epistemological foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis.

\(^{65}\) Gillis, *A Question of Final Belief*, 52.
2.2 The Necessity of a Developed Epistemology

Religious traditions are invariably human-instituted. Practices, truth claims, and doctrines may claim a transcendental origin but ultimately are the result of an attempt to systematise and categorise veridical religious encounters into comprehensible language for expression by the human person. Resulting from transcendental encounter, these propositional claims allow for the finite human person to gain an appreciation of their own position in relation to transcendental Reality. However, despite the finite nature of religious institutions, propositional truth claims are often attributed a transcendental authority. This results in the perception that other religious traditions possess only an inferior or entirely inauthentic conception of truth. Although these claims seem to highlight how one tradition may be superior to another, there are two strong counter arguments. 1) These claims of theological veracity and historicity are present in a number of different traditions. None of them seem vastly more convincing than any other. 2) These individual assertions are rarely what compels one to adopt a religious tradition in the first place. While it may be the case in some instances, Hick offers a very different perspective as to why one might follow a particular tradition. He asserts that religion is often simply a result of the circumstances of one’s birth.

Ultimately, however, Hick concludes that conflicting truth claims of the various major religious traditions are irrelevant to the spiritual needs of the human person. This chapter’s examination of Hick’s religious perspective highlights that it is the personal dimension of religious practice which is important. For Hick, there will never be a satisfactory resolution to issues of conflicting transcendental truth claims and so Hick asserts that we should just all continue getting-on-with-it. The truth of these propositional truth claims—given that no religious tradition shows any empirical evidence of greater salvific/liberative efficacy—seems to have little bearing on the practical outcome. As a result, the reasonable choice left

68 William Rowe, “Religious Pluralism,” 140, assumes a neutral observer in this case, one who has not encountered any kind of religious experience that they may use as reasonable evidence to support one tradition.
69 Hick, The Metaphor of God Incarnate, 8.
to the human person is to “learn to tolerate unresolved, and at present unresolvable, differences concerning these ultimate mysteries.”

Hick attempts to address these differences, adopting his epistemological foundation to demonstrate that it is not the authenticity of particular doctrines or metaphysical presuppositions that are important. However, a question arises: How can one justify the perspective that all the great religious traditions represent a valid pathway to salvation and liberation when the traditions themselves maintain irreconcilable truth claims? It is all well and good for Hick to cite that these differences are unimportant, but ultimately, they act as a significant barrier to any acceptance that the varied religious traditions all offer a valid pathway to salvation. In line with Hick, Michael Barnes asserts that taking the position that all traditions are equally valid responses to transcendent Reality is “essential to any theology of religions.” In the Western world, Christianity is seen as normative but, outside of the West, it becomes quickly evident that the majority of the religious population is made up of non-Christian worshippers. As such, an exclusivist that presents Christianity as the only valid pathway to transcendent truth becomes less persuasive; the majority of the Earth’s population exists outside the sphere of grace and salvation that is available through the Gospel. If Christianity is the sole pathway to salvation, how can one offer an explanation for the myriad of other traditions that exist within the global religious landscape? Not only is Christianity practiced by the minority of the human population, but the ratio is shrinking.

For Hick, religious traditions should instead be viewed as pathways towards salvation and liberation that are as many and varied as the variety of ways of “being human.” While this universal understanding of salvation that Hick highlights will be dealt with in further detail in a later chapter, it is worth considering here as it is an essential component in Hick’s developed philosophical framework.

Barnes promotes the pluralist perspective as a reaction to the religious diversity of the modern social environment. In doing so, he offers a critique on the exclusivist perspective and how it fails to address the social problems that result from a pluralistic society. He

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71 Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 64.
72 Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 46.
73 Barnes, Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism, 72.
74 Barnes, Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism, 8.
75 Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 47.
asserts that if Christianity is to be seen as normative, or to be seen as possessing superior access to truth, it would be doing other perspectives a disservice. Doing so places other religious traditions in an inferior position to the Christian tradition and calls their fundamental claims into question.\textsuperscript{76} To adopt a position of superiority asserts that the absolute claims of one’s tradition also possess more truth than those of the others. This then becomes a source of conflict.

Hick employs his hypothesis to attempt to address the difficulties that he sees within this attitude; as such, one of the most compelling reasons to examine Hick’s body of work is a practical one. Hick himself saw this need within the multi-cultural communities within Great Britain where endemic, racially motivated bigotry and othering was the cause of much suffering. He attributed this to the culture of superiority or imperialism that was ingrained within the British people, an attitude that Hick also observed within the exclusivist position taken in response to non-Christian religious traditions. And, for Hick, when propositional claims are understood as being born of superior access to truth, or as having a superior foundation, they are no longer beneficial.\textsuperscript{77} These disparate views invariably act as a barrier to any kind of empathy or dialogue between religious groups.\textsuperscript{78} If the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction is Hick’s foundation, then this practical starting point—this observation of a critical issue within Western culture—serves as the primary motivation for Hick’s hypothesis.

This is the very attitude that Hick sees as problematic within the Christian perspective of non-Christian traditions, and the one that he seeks to overcome by virtue of his epistemological claims. Hick’s position is that the conflicting truth claims of the major religious traditions, while they may seem to be irreconcilable, are not irreconcilable at all. He highlights that the validity of any religious tradition is impossible to determine; however, they may all share the same transcendental origin. This is justified through a distinction between transcendental Reality and how it is perceived, cognised, and interpreted by the human person.

\textsuperscript{76} Michael Barnes, \textit{Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism}, 72.
\textsuperscript{77} Hick, \textit{Problems of Religious Pluralism}, 50.
\textsuperscript{78} John Hick, “The Non–Absoluteness of Christianity,” 17, emphasises these barriers by delineating how religious superiority is used to justify the committal of evils by, and against, human persons.
2.3 What is Religion?

2.3.1 The Importance of Religious Experience in Hick’s Thought

Hick provides a succinct and definite explanation as to how religion should be recognised within life of the human person. It is constituted of two core elements: 1) how the human person understands the operation of reality, and 2) how the human person understands the appropriate mode of living within that reality. Hick also provides a third criterion by which religion may be recognised—religion invariably points beyond the finite and towards a transcendental Reality or truth.\(^{79}\) Both “understandings” must refer “beyond the natural world to God or Gods or to the Absolute or to a transcendent order or process.”\(^{80}\) Chester Gillis highlights that it is this concept of a personal religious experience that is foundational, and expressed throughout Hick’s body of work.\(^{81}\) By way of this definition, Hick reveals that he greatly values the personal, interpretive dimension of religious practice; it is how the individual worshipper sees themself within the universe, and in relation to transcendental Reality, that gives religion its meaning. This personal interpretive religious element is expressed finitely in the many and varied ways of being human. Each response to transcendental Reality is expressed individually and, as such, it becomes clear that a framework which validates each religious tradition as a valid encounter with transcendental Reality is essential for understanding other human persons as equal.\(^{82}\) It validates not only the individual’s religious beliefs, but also the fundamental way in which they see themselves existing within the world.

Inter-religiously, an individual may claim that their own tradition is more epistemologically sound, or the theological claims are more well-reasoned, than those of the other.\(^{83}\) However, holding individual interpretation as the core defining aspect of religion acts to hinder such a claim; when religious practice is understood as distinctly personal and interpretive, the veracity of religious claims are similarly personal. Believing


\(^{80}\) Hick, “The New Map of the Universe of Faiths,” 278.

\(^{81}\) Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 45.

\(^{82}\) However, it must be stated that Hick does not see religions as equal responses. Hick does not suppose that he is able to determine the value of religious truth within a religious tradition, only that a core of truth does exist. John Hick, “On Grading Religions,” Religious Studies 17, no. 4 (December 1981): 451.

\(^{83}\) Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 109–110.
one’s position is more epistemologically sound becomes a matter of interpretation and often results from familiarity with one’s own tradition, rather than a convincing appeal to transcendental truth. This perspective becomes quite convincing when one observes that the religious tradition a worshipper belongs to is largely determined by the place of their birth. As such, Hick finds it difficult to ascribe a greater access to truth as a result of geography.

This emphasis on human awareness and relationship to the Real is reminiscent of William James’ position. For James, religion should be recognised as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” Again, similarly to Hick, James makes clear that religious practice must be referential toward a transcendent Reality. However, within the scope of James’ insight, is a participatory, active component that is missing from Hick’s. James places religious ritual and action alongside experience and feelings. In contrast, Hick’s conception of religion is derived purely from human understanding; it constitutes a personal framework of the nature of reality and humanity’s place within said framework. By contrasting James’ definition with the three criteria provided by Hick, any form of religious action is notably absent in the latter. For Hick, religion is not just participation with the Real, or even a response, but constitutes an understanding, within the human person, of their relationship in regard to transcendent Reality. Given this cognitive dimension functions as the core defining element of religion within Hick’s framework, one can immediately understand how Hick’s epistemological insights greatly affect how religion operates.

Hick’s epistemology provides the framework to understand how the human person can know God. As such, it demonstrates exactly how Hick sees religion’s place within the world. When one examines James alongside Hick we see that religion is understood as being deeply personal. Yet, at the same time, religious traditions are made up of hundreds of practitioners. Each tradition possesses its own systematised theological propositions and

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truth claims, each with its own framework of understanding that delineates for practitioners the correct mode of being a human person. William James highlights that these religious organisations, their theologies, and resulting philosophical understandings are secondary to the personal religion espoused in both James and Hick’s criteria. This highlights that, even within the same tradition, there may exist significantly varied responses to religious experience. Neither Hick nor James views a religious tradition as simply a community of homogeneous individuals with identical beliefs.

The mode in which religious experience is interpreted accounts for the variation of responses that manifest both inter-religiously and intra-religiously. This interpretive process, being intrinsically personal, varies significantly depending on the context of the experiencer, leading to a genuine ambiguity of religious experience. One can infer, then, that all religious experience is different, even within the same conceptual framework. Within Hick’s understanding of religion, it is this inner process that gives religious practice its meaning, but also demonstrates that the derived meaning is distinctly altered by the interpretive process, and the framework within which it occurs. This will be more clearly elucidated by an examination of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s impact on John Hick’s position.

2.3.2 Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s Influence

Hick’s definition of religion, as a personal understanding of the human person’s position in relation to Ultimate Reality, represents only one dimension of the religious life of the human person. Hick highlights that the personal religion he describes does not exist in isolation. There is both the personal dimension and the religio-cultural context that arises from a religion’s traditions, teachings, and practices. In this regard he is heavily indebted to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, so much so that Paul Rhodes Eddy claims Smith’s body of work created the paradigm with which Hick constructed his own understanding of religious

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87 James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 50.
88 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 45, highlights Hick’s thoughts on the matter and ties this understanding to his epistemology. For Hick, rather than an explanation as to the functioning of the universe, it provides a context that allows for interpretation and reflection based on the totality of a person’s experience.
practice. While Hick moves beyond his insights and observations, the core of Hick’s epistemology can be said to find its starting point in Smith’s distinction between faith and cumulative tradition.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his work *The Meaning and End of Religion*, highlights that there is a divide between the various religious groups within the world and calls for a movement towards a unified, global community. Smith attempts to overcome inter-religious barriers by deconstructing the concepts that act to create them. The word religion itself, conceptualised and understood within the Western context, acts to create a border between religious traditions that prevents them from being perceived as compatible. Hick adopts a similar perspective, highlighting that religions more closely resemble a dynamic continuum than a series of discrete, homogenous groups. This contemporary understanding of religion seems to be distinct from the original intention of each tradition’s founder, who likely did not see the various traditions as being in competition with each other for the souls of humanity.

Here it would be of benefit to delineate the distinction between religion, and religious tradition, within Hick’s framework. Hick uses the word religion to denote both, but there is a marked distinction. Religion itself is a personal act, an understanding of the human person and their position in the wider universe in relation to Ultimate Reality. This experience of religion can be derived from religious practices or acts that function as a first-order response and are experiential in nature. Religious tradition (which Hick often refers to as “a religion”) contains an element of historical and cultural construction that exists alongside the personal, interpretive element. This perspective is adopted directly from the clear distinction that exists within Smith’s body of work between faith and cumulative tradition.

Examining Smith’s account of the constitutive elements of a religion will aid in developing a greater understanding of Hick’s perspective. While Smith refers to the personal dimension of a religion as faith, Hick asserts that there isn’t a sufficient word to describe this

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93 Hick, “The New Map of the Universe of Faiths,” 278.
element. Given no other option, he chooses to employ the word “spirituality” as the meaning it evokes is the closest finite language can get to expressing this personal dimension of religious activity. Hick describes this experiential dimension as “an immediate, inner, personal, living and ‘existential’ participation in an experienced relationship with the greater, perhaps infinitely greater, and mysterious reality which in English we call God.” Despite his use of Christian terms, Hick does not confine this personal, transcendental experience to the Christian tradition alone. The concepts of faith and spirituality both attempt to encapsulate a universal openness of the human person to transcendental meaning. Smith highlights that the religious traditions of the contemporary world only represent the current manifestation of an essential human pointedness towards transcendental Reality. All human persons experience faith in the same way; it is within its expression that it finds difference. For Hick, spirituality is not drawn from propositional claims, intellectual frameworks or traditional practices. It is experiential and participatory, a cognitive response to religious experience. Faith and spirituality have their own individual connotations and, for Hick, inevitably fall short of what they try to describe: the individual, personal response to experience of Ultimate Reality. This propensity within the human person to attempt to understand themselves vis-à-vis Ultimate Reality becomes the catalyst for the development of cumulative tradition.

Although faith and spirituality constitute the experiential component of religion, cumulative tradition represents a second, systematised element that can be understood as the mundane, historically situated component of each religious tradition. These groups of practices and beliefs are distinct, delineable, and measurable, each with their own constituent components and principles. Hick asserts that they are human constructions and “inevitably they reflect not only the best but also the worst in human nature.” Cumulative

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97 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 44.
tradition is, thus, afforded a secondary position to the personal religious dimension of spirituality.\textsuperscript{100}

Cumulative tradition stems from an intellectual, second-order response to religious experience, rather than the first-order response to be found within spirituality. It is the systematisation of the datum of religious experience; it is an attempt to ossify many accounts of religious experience into prescriptive doctrine, practice, traditions, etc. to offer a guide for practitioners in a religious tradition.\textsuperscript{101} Cumulative tradition is, thus, predicated on the personal religious dimension but possesses a character distinct of faith.\textsuperscript{102} It is always derived from someone else's religious experience, someone else's interpretation, and someone else's context.

Although their accounts are similar in a number of ways, it is the differences between Hick and Smith that offer a greater insight into Hick’s approach to the topic of religion. Their major point of contention lies in their understanding of how the relationship between personal experience and cumulative tradition should be understood. Smith asserts that personal faith is hindered by an attempt to conceptualise and categorise the core concepts of a religious tradition.\textsuperscript{103} As such, Smith seeks to move past the cumulative tradition and understand religious nature at a personal level. Within this understanding, faith cannot be adequately described or communicated, and efficacy of accumulated tradition in accurately affirming and reinforcing the core of a tradition is both limited and limiting. “To be religious is an ultimately personal act. It is, to an important degree, an act that one makes in community; but it is not one that any community can make for one.”\textsuperscript{104} In contrast, Hick interprets cumulative tradition as possessing a significant effect on the faith of the individual; it creates a framework and context through which the human person may understand religious encounter.\textsuperscript{105} However, this departure from Smith’s perspective of faith can be largely explained by their different conceptions of how theology fits within this bipartite understanding of religious tradition.

\textsuperscript{100} Hick, “Foreword,” xv.
\textsuperscript{101} Schmidt–Leukel, “Pluralist Theologies,” 62–63.
\textsuperscript{102} Hick “Foreword,” xv.
\textsuperscript{103} Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, 50.
\textsuperscript{104} Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, 177.
\textsuperscript{105} Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 212.
and Hick both appreciate that theology is “a part of this world.”\textsuperscript{106} It would seem appropriate to categorise theological reflection as an element of cumulative tradition, but Smith understands theological responses to religious experience as intellectual expressions of faith.\textsuperscript{107} At odds with this position, Hick instead understands theologies as second-order responses to religious experience and notes the contribution they make to cumulative tradition. Theologies function in the same way as other elements of cumulative tradition; they are employed to construct a framework within which to interpret one’s religious experience.

2.3.3 Hick’s Emphasis on a Personal Religious Perspective

Smith asserts that the word religion is insufficient in describing how religious traditions function. The term religion (equivalent to how we are employing religious tradition) itself does not accurately reflect what it describes; while Western religions are often seen as comprehensive and complete positions, what we would describe as religion throughout Asia takes a very different tone.\textsuperscript{108} Smith engages with Eastern traditions in order to highlight that the conceptual barriers that exist within the Western religious understanding are not universal. Accordingly, he asserts that there is no clear distinction where one religion begins and another ends.

A contemporary Chinese person could simultaneously be an active practitioner of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. These religious traditions are not seen as alternatives to one another, or in competition, but bodies of practice and spiritual belief that coexist within the same religio-cultural sphere.\textsuperscript{109} An individual need not identify as a Buddhist, a Confucian or a Taoist, but may be a practitioner of all three, to varying degrees.\textsuperscript{110} For Smith, a religious tradition’s cumulative tradition seems to function to add context and

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{106} Hick, “Foreword,” xvi.
\textsuperscript{107} Smith, \textit{The Meaning and End of Religion}, 178.
\textsuperscript{108} Smith, \textit{The Meaning and End of Religion}, 17–18.
\textsuperscript{109} Smith, \textit{The Meaning and End of Religion}, 68.
\textsuperscript{110} Hick, “Foreword,” xii–xiii.
\end{footnotes}
structure to individual religious practice, but ultimately remains secondary to the personal
religious dimension of spirituality.\footnote{Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, 190.}

Smith highlights that this takes places in contemporary Christianity too. Within the
Christian tradition there are many different concepts of what it means to be a Christian,
what it means to live in Christ, and how such an understanding should be incorporated into
daily life. There is no universally accepted Christian understanding as to the nature of the
transcendent sphere and how it relates to the categorical, natural world.\footnote{Hick. “On Wilfred Cantwell Smith,” 7.} Looked at in this
way it seems there is as much variation within a single body of worshippers as there is
across the multitude of religious traditions. For Smith, “we are all persons, clustered in
mundane communities, no doubt, and labelled with mundane labels but, so far as
transcendence is concerned, encountering it each directly, personally, if at all. In the eyes of
God each of us is a person, not a type.”\footnote{Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, 191.} It is clear why both Smith and Hick highlight the
importance of the personal religious dimension over cumulative tradition. Even within the
theological framework of a particular tradition, the individual chooses to accept or reject
different propositional claims as they see fit. This seems to affirm Smith’s claim that a single
religious tradition cannot be understood as a discrete body of homogenous worshippers,
and is cause to doubt that any religion possesses inherently insurmountable boundaries that
divide denomination from denomination, or tradition from tradition.\footnote{Hick “Foreword,” xiv.} There is no clearly
definable edge that separates one religious tradition from another.

\section*{2.3.4 The Importance of Spirituality over Cumulative Tradition}

Hick uses philosophical language to elucidate the differences between the personal
and collective elements of a religious tradition, and to explain why theological language falls
into the latter. For Hick, responses to religious experience and stimuli are individual and
personal, making them first-order responses. They are not filtered beyond an individual
worshipper’s personal context. Theologies represent second-order responses as they
represent an intellectual response to a first-order encounter, but then applied to a population as a universal claim. For Hick, theological language treats religious experience and responses to it as datum for the construction of theories. In this way, Hick removes the element of faith from theology and ascribes it the same status as history or other, mundane dimensions of a religious tradition: “For the cumulative religious traditions come within the domain of the historian and are equally available to him whether or not he be of any religious persuasion.”

As such, theologies are merely rationalisations of the data of faith or spirituality, and to attribute them an authoritative character is a potentially dangerous practice. Despite its reliance on faith as a guide, granting an institution’s theological claims absolute authority risks sacrificing personal faith in favour of systematising it. For both Smith and Hick, faith is arrived at via a personal orientation towards transcendental Reality, not a collection of propositional claims and metaphysical speculations. “The end of religion, in the classical sense of its purpose and goal, that to which it points and may lead, is God.” This examination of Hick’s perspective of religion highlights that he strongly emphasises the personal dimension in the life of the religious worshipper. Although the religio-social context arising from cumulative traditions undoubtedly affects how experience is cognised, the core of religion is ultimately personal. This demonstrates that Hick’s epistemological foundation is integral as it elucidates how reality is perceived and cognised, categorically. The core of religious understanding is religious experience, and religious experience is understood within Hick’s body of work through a Kantian lens.

2.4 Hick’s Kantian Epistemology

2.4.1 The Noumenal/Phenomenal Distinction

Examining Hick’s conception of religion has made it clear that religious experience is central to any religious tradition. And religious experience, according to Hick, is cognised in a

115 Hick, “Foreword,” xvi.
limited way by the human person in accordance with his understanding of Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction. For Hick, it is commonly understood that human experience and cognition is shaped by the context in which they occur. Christopher Sinkinson notes that Hick is indebted to Immanuel Kant throughout his body of work; however, it is his epistemological foundation in which Kant is most evident.\textsuperscript{119} Hick describes the debt he owes to Kant’s epistemological insight most completely in \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}. He interprets the distinction as a divide between the transcendental concept of an object and the human person’s sensory experience.

\textit{Our chief philosophical resource will be one of Kant’s most basic epistemological insights, namely that the mind actively interprets sensory information in terms of concept so that the environment as we consciously perceive and inhabit it is our familiar three-dimensional world of objects interacting in space.}\textsuperscript{120}

For Hick, Kant’s basic epistemological insight is a self-evident reality. If every human person goes through the process of contextualising their experiences, it becomes obvious that those experiences are not universally interpreted the same way. An individual may go through the same experience as another and, as a result of their own interpretation, will highlight and remember different facets of said experiences. Hick asserts that this distinction whereby experience is coloured by the context of the experiencer has been empirically confirmed by cognitive and social psychology.\textsuperscript{121} However, he highlights that the human person can see evidence of this within their daily life. He is assured that anyone who reflects upon their own experiences will reach the same conclusion. As such, he treats the distinction between Reality and human perception above refute.

Kant highlights this disparity in knowledge between that which is experienced and the thing-in-itself (the thing \textit{an sich}). The phenomenon, the object that is experienced via the senses, is merely representative of the transcendental, noumenal Reality, and represents an

\textsuperscript{119} Sinkinson, \textit{The Universe of Faiths}, 102.
\textsuperscript{120} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 240.
\textsuperscript{121} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 240.
incomplete manifestation of the thing an sich. He describes this transcendental dimension as a boundary concept which is only intuited—it is a negative concept, outside the realm of sensibility and which allows for no concrete, positive claims to be made of the noumenon. It remains a purely intellectual concept that can only be understood as existing because of the evidence of the phenomenal, finite manifestations of it. As such, the thing-in-itself remains outside the realm of true, comprehensive intelligibility as it cannot be understood except through subjective, sensory experience.

Elucidated in this way, the distinction becomes a simple notion. Although there are many nuances, Hick takes Kant to mean that there is an un-experienceable, transcendental Reality beyond sensory experience; the noumenal world describes the actual, the thing an sich, while the phenomenal world is this actual experienced subjectively. For Kant, the distinction between noumenon and phenomenon stems from a critical discussion of time and space in which, he argues, there must be forms which the mind imposes on sense experience to categorise and understand it. While the phenomenal world refers beyond itself to the conceptual, noumenal world, the phenomenon is not ever truly representative of the concept to which it refers as it is bound by sensibility.

To explain the way in which the infinite is experienced finitely, Hick presses Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction into service and moves beyond its original scope. He takes the concept of noumenon beyond a mere transcendental object and employs it to describe the disjunction between the Real and the Real-experienced. Specifically, he uses Kant’s insight to attribute the transcendental Real (that is, God) with the status of Divine Noumenon. Unverifiable as it is, Hick employs this distinction to highlight that there is a Divine Noumenon, at the core of each of the major religious traditions, which is experienced subjectively as phenomena in the form of religious experience. This distinction allows for Hick to make the claim that all religious experience is ambiguous as phenomenological religious experience cannot be truly representative of the transcendental Reality. He

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supports this assertion with the claim that the use of proposition and human language to
delineate and describe the ineffable will always find itself insufficient. Here he attributes
intangible concepts with the same noumenal status as the finite concepts the human person
constructs during every-day experience. The image created by attributing characteristics to
the Divine Noumenon via human language is not the reality of God or “the Real,” but the
concept of God encapsulated within a tradition, or the phenomenological Real.\footnote{128} This goes
so far as to limit any substantive claim that can be made of transcendental Reality as,
ultimately, it exists beyond human description with finite concepts.\footnote{129} However, somewhat
paradoxically, Hick employs this distinction to also make the claim that the Real can be
understood as present within the various religious traditions.\footnote{130} Hick seems to employ some
of Kant’s logic to reach that conclusion; the noumenal Real is postulated as being present
within religious traditions by virtue of the phenomenological expressions that are expressed
in each one.

### 2.4.2 Hick’s Use of Kant

Hick employs Kant’s insight to describe the distinction between the Real and the Real
as-experienced by the human person. However, cumulative tradition also plays a significant
role. In the case of religious experience, the lens of the observer is coloured by their
personal context and shaped by the framework of their religious tradition.\footnote{131} Ultimately, it is
cumulative tradition that forms this framework and contributes to the lens with which the
individual contextualises said experience. In this way, Hick describes the various religious
traditions as possessing valid access to the Real, despite their irreconcilable religious claims.
\footnote{132} Provided one accepts Hick’s epistemological claim, this provides a satisfactory
explanation as to how religious traditions can be understood as responses to encounter of
transcendental Reality. While Hick applies Kant’s rationale to construct a Divine Noumenon

\footnote{128} Hick, “The New Map of the Universe of Faiths,” 283.
\footnote{129} Cheetham, \textit{John Hick}, 136: “The Real in itself \textit{transcends} the distinction between impersonality and
personality, thus the seeming contradiction of both these characteristics being present in the same thing
occurs not in the Real in itself but in the \textit{human comprehension} of the Real.”
\footnote{130} Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 63.
\footnote{131} Hick, \textit{Philosophy of Religion}, 117–19.
\footnote{132} Hick, \textit{Philosophy of Religion}, 119.
from phenomenological accounts of religious experience, for Kant the Divine is a concept arrived at by virtue of reasoning rather than experienced through the senses in a similar way to an object.\textsuperscript{133} To justify this position, Hick employs Thomistic language to highlight how Kant’s distinction may be applied beyond the finite to describe how transcendental Reality is subjectively experienced.\textsuperscript{134} Hick interprets Aquinas’ statement as acting to place God beyond human knowing, except through complex propositions. God is experienced in the mode of the knower, which is of human finiteness, and then only through propositional claims. Hick uses this interpretation of Aquinas’ position and emphasises that the mode of the knower is limited by human finitude and acted upon by the context of the knower. If context is shaped by cumulative tradition, one can easily account for the variety of responses to transcendental experience by asserting that the mode of the knower varies from one tradition to the next. Kant’s insight is of use in elucidating this variation in religious responses, as he highlights the clear distinction between the thing as perceived by the perceiver (within Hick’s interpretation of Aquinas, what is known according to the mode of the knower) and the thing-in-itself, unperceived by anyone. Each religious experience is shaped by the context of the experiencer, which is then shaped (according to Kant) into finite concepts capable of expression.\textsuperscript{135}

However, Hick asserts that one must recognise that the transcendental Real is beyond any possible comprehension by the finite human person. “God, to use our Christian term, is infinite.”\textsuperscript{136} Human language and concepts may be used to attempt to describe the Real in a limited, phenomenal capacity; however, transcendental Reality always exceeds or surpasses description and categorisation. For Hick, this demonstrates that it is possible for the major religious traditions to make irreconcilable propositional claims, and still be considered responses to valid encounters with Ultimate Reality.\textsuperscript{137} However, this does not mean that all encounters are equally valid, nor do these propositional claims encapsulate the essence of the noumenal Real. “The differences between the religions are not incidental or

\textsuperscript{133} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 243.
\textsuperscript{134} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 241: “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.” Here Hick interprets this to mean, although God is simple and undifferentiated, God can only be known to human through complex propositions “according to the mode of the knower.”
\textsuperscript{135} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 243.
\textsuperscript{136} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 246.
\textsuperscript{137} Hick, “The New Map of the Universe of Faiths,” 283.
insignificant. In affirming the one ‘Ultimate Reality’ behind all the religions, he concludes not that every religious expression is therefore true, but that every religious expression is therefore relative.”¹³⁸

Underpinned by Hick’s application of Kant’s insight to his conception of religious experience, theological language and propositional claims become metaphorical, rather than literal. It is by this function that propositional claims convey meaning; they convey meaning derived from reflection of a veridical religious encounter despite their non-literal content, a concept that will be explored further in the following chapter’s examination of religious language.¹³⁹ When combined with Hick’s claim that the transcendent Reality has been validly experienced within other religious traditions, this overcomes the problem posed by conflicting truth claims. The Divine Noumenon is experienced as phenomena which can only be reflective, and never representative, of the Real an sich. If this is the case, Hick argues, religious experience within other non-Christian traditions can logically be derived from valid religious encounter with the same source, yet still result in conflicting truth claims.¹⁴⁰

However, James Kraft notes that Hick fails to qualify his assertion that Kant’s perspective offers the best approach to describing the distinction between the noumenal Real and how it is finitely perceived. Hick fails to demonstrate that the Kantian distinction accurately describes this disparity and, as such, is hardly a conclusive account.¹⁴¹ Nor does he satisfactorily demonstrate that phenomenal religious experience can be attributed to a transcendental, divine source.¹⁴² Alvin Plantinga levels the same critiques against Hick as he does against this Kantian insight: if the noumena is indescribable and outside our capacity to comprehend, or even sense, how does one know that the noumenal Real exists?¹⁴³

However, what is clear is that this distinction is foundational for Hick’s epistemic claims and

¹³⁸ Knitter, No Other Name?, 148, describes this succinctly in No Other Name, but he contends that Hick does not see all religions as equally valid. The significant variation of interpretation between religious traditions may stem from a response to one Ultimate Reality (a concept that we will explore further in chapter 2) but the subjective nature of Hick’s Kantian epistemology means that certainly some may mediate better than others.

¹³⁹ Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 248.

¹⁴⁰ Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 249.


¹⁴³ Alvin Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief (Oxford University Press, 2000), 44.
his attempt to establish that the myriad religious traditions owe their origins to transcendental encounter is reliant on an acceptance of the Kantian distinction as convincing.

2.4.3 Religious Ambiguity

Hick’s use of the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction as a tool for overcoming conflicting religious claims ultimately leads him to the conclusion that the world is religiously ambiguous. For Hick, all religious traditions encounter the same noumenal Real. However, each interprets the encounter differently as it is acted upon by their own context. In so doing, each tradition constructs a different phenomenal understanding from the same Real, experienced diversely.\(^{144}\) Although each tradition offers a different understanding of human relationality to the Real—each possesses its own truth claims, views, practices, and traditions that are irreconcilable with each other—Hick does not challenge the validity of any one religious tradition. Instead, his challenge is directed towards the notion that any one tradition has grounds to claim a more authentic understanding of the metaphysical Real than any other. Although he states that not all traditions interpret their experience of the Real in equally valid ways, it becomes clear from his use of Kant, and the inaccessibility of unfiltered knowledge of the noumenal Real, that no tradition can be aware if they possess a greater quantum of truth. As a result, Hick moves towards a rethinking of the theology of religions.\(^{145}\)

For Barnes, Hick’s presupposition that there is no universal human position one can adopt that is authentically representative or descriptive of Ultimate Reality forms the foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis.\(^{146}\) He interprets it thusly: one cannot logically adopt the position that one’s tradition’s absolute claims are superior to those of another position; they are both founded in the experience of the same Ultimate Reality.\(^{147}\) They

\(^{144}\) Cheetham, *John Hick*, 135.


\(^{146}\) Barnes, *Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism*, 72.

\(^{147}\) Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235.
maintain their authenticity and validity despite the diverse interpretations, foundations, and claims that spring forth from their encounters with the Real.

Even the most advanced form of mystical experience, as an experience undergone by an embodied consciousness whose mind/brain has been conditioned by a particular religious tradition, must be affected by the conceptual framework and spiritual training provided by that tradition, and accordingly takes different forms.\(^{148}\)

Here Hick asserts that each practitioner of a tradition, regardless of the authenticity or form of transcendental encounter, will be conditioned by their own religious context. Put simply, the world as one perceives it is the world that is interpreted through a lens (Hick describes it as the interpreting, selecting, and unifying action of the perceiver). In the case of religious experience that lens is coloured by the practitioner’s personal context and shaped by the framework of their religious tradition.\(^{149}\) This context stems from the historical, cultural, and geographical pressures in which the tradition finds itself. Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is founded on a claim which radically rethinks how religions relate to transcendental Reality to allow for, and explain, the great diversity of religious traditions. It is founded on the premise that humans are universally limited in their authentic comprehension of Ultimate Reality. As Gordon Kaufman puts it, “a universal frame of orientation for human understanding and life is no more available to use than is a universal language.”\(^{150}\)

To wit, even when experiencing the same truth, each tradition subjectifies and describes it differently; they create a sign that points towards the Real but is insufficient in encapsulating it totally. It is only natural that individuals with different spiritual understandings and contexts will invariably understand and interpret such an encounter differently. Hick’s hypothesis aims to account for religious diversity and places the emphasis

\(^{148}\) Hick, Problems of Religious Plurality, 43.
on the soteriological dimension evident in all the great religious traditions, rather than on specific metaphysical claims.\textsuperscript{151}

### 2.5 Experiencing as Experiencing-As

Hick postulates that the human person possesses a natural inclination towards the transcendental. This is a \textit{personal} religious faith, or spirituality, that is distinct from religion’s cumulative tradition and its accompanying doctrines, creed, dogmas and philosophical formulas. This faith stems directly from personal encounter and it is a non-propositional response to religious experience, but how is this experienced conveyed to the human person? For Hick, spiritual understanding cannot be derived from propositional claims about what we know of the Real, but must always stem from a first-order response to religious experience.\textsuperscript{152} As this chapter has described, Hick employs the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction to highlight the distance between the thing as experienced by the perceiver and the thing \textit{an sich}. However, this does not elucidate how religio-cultural context functions to shape phenomenal experience. To demonstrate this, Hick engages with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and describes how sensory experience is acted upon by the context and previous experience to alter cognition at the very point of experience.

For Hick, the response to religious experience has more in common with sense perception than propositional belief. This is already demonstrable when one examines his use of Kant’s noumenon and applies it to construct a noumenal Real; religious experience is more akin to seeing the Real than it is to intellectualise and speculate about its characteristics.\textsuperscript{153} Hick’s understanding of religious faith is a direct result of this application of religious experience. For Hick, theological propositions only serve to establish a relationship between the human person and an idea or concept. They do not offer any kind of experience of Ultimate Reality.\textsuperscript{154} As such, theological or propositional belief has no

\textsuperscript{151} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 36.  
\textsuperscript{152} Gillis, \textit{A Question of Final Belief}, 44.  
\textsuperscript{153} Cheetham, \textit{John Hick}, 36.  
\textsuperscript{154} Sinkinson, \textit{The Universe of Faiths}, 33.
bearing on religious faith directly. However, it does seem to offer context and conceptual knowledge that functions to shape cognition of religious experience and alters the character of one’s faith indirectly.

Hick elucidates that religious experience is more akin to sense perception. It stems from awareness rather than a considered, intellectual response. Hick is careful to draw a distinction between the experience itself and the active reflection on an experience that attempts to conceptualise it in human terms—attributing characteristics to it as one would an object. This perspective seems to result from Hick’s understanding of theological exercise as an element within the cumulative tradition of a religion. Religious experiences reflected upon intellectually become a body of evidence to support second-order theological claims. However, it is important to distinguish between different modes of response within Hick’s thought. Faith seems to originate as a first-order response rather than a second-order propositional claim and, I would contend, seems to operate more similarly to a feeling or unconscious understanding.

One can already see the Kantian distinction at play in Hick’s insight into how experience operates independently of propositional claims. The noumenal Real provides the source of religious experience while religious experience is, for lack of a better word, experienced phenomenally. Then, this phenomenol experience is reflected upon intellectually resulting in a propositional claim that is coloured by previous contexts. This clearly delineates how Hick understands the process of construction of religious truth claims and how they are concepts that are constructed from a subjective, incomplete understanding of Ultimate Reality. Hick is not making a statement about the value of intellectualising or postulating about God, nor does he claim that propositional belief is somehow invalid or not formed from a response and awareness of the Real. They stem from experience of the Real but cannot capture the essence of such an encounter. As such,

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propositional belief is insufficient as a response to religious experience. For Hick, however, spirituality is the awareness of the Real and religious cognition.

Hick postulates that cognition does not always presuppose presence. We perceive when we are cognising something that is present, but we similarly cognise something in its absence by holding religious belief. Religious belief is the act of cognition by acquaintance and is not equitable to intellectualising or thinking about the object of that belief. It is distinct from propositional belief as it is a personal understanding drawn from encounter and reflection rather than an a priori claim. Hick asserts that this is present in religious literature, as opposed to theological literature that results from thinking about God. Religious literature, in scripture or prayer, “presupposes a cognition of God by acquaintance.” As such, for Hick, religious literature is a valid source of religious experience beyond direct religious encounter.

Gillis highlights that, for Hick, religious experience is invariably linked to personal context. Experiences can be interpreted in a multitude of different ways and are contingent on the past experiences and the context of the observer. A human person’s individual spirituality is a result of their response to these religious experiences and continues to colour their future experiences. Hick attempts to describe this contrast between the reality of the religious experience, experiencing, and how it is perceived, experiencing-as. In doing so, he appropriates the philosophical concept of seeing-as from the modern philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein’s seeing-as attempts to highlight how an individual’s perceptions can change even when an observed object does not. Hick doesn’t restrict this to the idea of seeing-as, however, and he develops Wittgenstein’s thought to encapsulate all experience. For Hick it is not just an exercise that highlights changing perceptions in response to changes in stimulus. Instead he emphasises the individual’s context and subjectivity of experience to demonstrate how this can shape and mediate all sense perception. “Applying this to religions themselves, Hick maintains that they are

156 Hick, “Faith as Experiencing—As,” 35.
158 Hick, “Faith as Experiencing—As,” 34.
159 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 45.
160 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 52.
161 Cheetham, John Hick, 11.
complex mixes of cultural responses to the transcendent—the culture filters the ‘real’ experience.”¹⁶² This is how Hick builds upon his Kantian base to offer an explanation as to how experience practically functions in different contexts.

It is worth examining Wittgenstein’s concept and how Hick employs it within his own epistemological framework as it will allow us a greater understanding of how Immanuel Kant’s distinction underpins and contributes to Hick’s hypothesis. Wittgenstein’s concept of seeing-as is a description of the processes that occur when an object is observed; something is seen, and immediately and without any pause, it is seen-as. Objects that are seen can have two different and distinct interpretations by the same viewer. The most famous example employed by Wittgenstein is the duck-rabbit exercise that demonstrates the ambiguity of sensory perception. In this puzzle picture the viewer can see both the image of a duck and a rabbit. As the viewer concentrates on seeing the duck, the duck is visible. Conversely, if one focuses on the rabbit, the image of the rabbit becomes clear. The viewer’s mind is able to switch back and forth between the two alternatives as they please.¹⁶³ What Wittgenstein attempts to highlight with this exercise is that perception is ambiguous and can be controlled to a degree by our contexts. When the duck is in the mind of the viewer, the duck becomes more clearly visible and distinct than the rabbit. The picture does not lose its “rabbit-ness” as the image does not change; rather it is the context of the viewer that acts upon the viewer’s recognition of the image. Now with some understanding of Wittgenstein’s seeing-as in hand it is worth establishing that Hick uses this concept and applies it to all experience. Seeing-as, within Hick’s epistemological framework becomes experiencing-as—the process that Wittgenstein puts forward is expanded to describe the function of all human perception.

This is a result of Hick’s assertion that even as sense perceptions objects do not arrive in our minds unmediated. They have already been acted upon by our previous experience and contexts and are “experienced-as.”¹⁶⁴ As such, sense experiences are interpreted at the time of experiencing, rather than a reflection upon said experience. All

¹⁶² Cheetham, John Hick, 17.
¹⁶⁴ Cheetham, John Hick, 36.
experience of the world is understood and mediated through our personal lens. Hick understands this as an experience of the real world, filtered into a new form as a result of the act of experiencing.

This experiential understanding is not restricted to mundane experience either. Hick makes little distinction between religious experience and mundane, categorical experience as, for Hick, all experience is experienced-as or experienced subjectively, regardless of its source. This is because, regardless of the object experienced, all experience contains an element of interpretation in the process of cognition and recognition. Thus, all experience is similar in how it is interpreted, regardless of the source. It is the object being experienced that is vastly different in religious experience. “This is the thesis that all experiencing is experiencing-as.” It is important to clearly state that what Hick intends to establish is only the similarity of function between sense perception and religious encounter. He does not postulate that they are somehow the same and that God or the Real is functionally a physical object. Instead, he places the onus of the experience on the experiencer rather than what is experienced—by employing his Kantian distinction he is outlining an understanding of how the finite human person experiences the world and not of that which is being experienced.

An important factor in understanding how Hick describes the process of religious experience is how he employs recognition. Hick employs the word “recognition” in his discussion of the processes at play within Wittgenstein’s seeing-as, but he also makes it clear that this is only as there is no word within the English language that truly encapsulates what he is trying to describe. The word “recognition” is employed to describe the initial cognitive response to an experience, but equally it could be used to describe misrecognition as well. Hick highlights that human interpretation of experience is limited and shaped by context and, thus, misrecognition of an object is just as possible as an accurate account. For Hick, one can experience A as X but that does not mean A necessarily is X.

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165 Cheetham, John Hick, 13.
166 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 53.
Thus, seeing-as is always filtered through context; this contextual lens is not restricted to moments of reflection and happens at the initial point of observation and response. Hick asserts that the viewer must possess the correct context for recognition to take place, as sense perception is ultimately subjective. Hick highlights the example of a stone-age man coming across a fork. If he has never seen it before, he lacks the context to understand what he is seeing.\textsuperscript{168} A contemporary Western person would see the fork as an eating implement, but the stone-age person might see it as a tool for other purposes or as an aesthetically pleasing item of adornment. This different context immediately colours how the viewer perceives any kind of experience.

For Hick, lacking the appropriate context or concept for recognition and being unable to adequately perform an act of recognition are equitable statements. To recognise, one must have an already established understanding of the concept being recognised. This previous context creates propositions through the act of recognition. Hick uses the example of a bird: when seeing and recognising something as a bird, the viewer attributes to the bird certain characteristics. It is alive, it was once born from an egg, and it will someday die.\textsuperscript{169} However, if the bird is, in fact, a plane, these attributes are false conclusions based on misrecognition on the part of the viewer. Functionally, not possessing the context for being able to recognise a bird as a plane (perhaps the viewer has never seen a plane before) or not adequately identifying the plane (it may have only been seen in passing) have a similar outcome. Hick highlights that it is our own experience that informs us of what something is, or how to identify it, but also how we assign attributes to an object in encounter.

It is becoming clear how Hick sees sense perception as similar to a response to religious experience. For Hick, there is the initial experience, but it is invariably contextualised and experienced-as; how the character of the Real is recognised is coloured by culture and religious understanding. Recognition functions to colour the way that something is experienced in a religious encounter and the experiencer attributes many assumptions and characteristics to the Real at the initial point of this encounter. This understanding functions to describe the process that allows for the distance between Divine Noumenon and phenomenon described in Hick’s use of Kant’s insight. Major religious

\textsuperscript{168} Hick, “Faith as Experiencing–As,” 38.
\textsuperscript{169} Hick, “Faith as Experiencing–As,” 38.
traditions contextualise encounters with the Real through their own contexts and then
develop their own way of “thinking-and-experiencing the Real” which, in turn, continues to
colour their future encounters.\textsuperscript{170} This results in their own complex understandings of the
human person in relation to the Real and their own propositional understanding of
transcendental nature.

However, Mathis argues strongly against Hick’s claim that religious experience is
equitable to sensory experience in the way it is perceived. He relies mainly on the argument
that sensory experience is coercive and is inescapable for the human person. It demands a
response and compels the human person to respond to it, while, in contrast, experience of
God does not compel. It must be a voluntary response of faith.\textsuperscript{171} He employs the argument
of the Chaldeans making war upon Jerusalem. Hick himself highlighted that this was
experienced and reflected upon as the judgement of God upon Israel. However, Mathis
highlights that those involved would have had a much more naturalistic account and that
their very lives depended on it. “What is essential to the soldier is the compelling quality of
ordinary experience. Presumably (from the naturalist’s viewpoint) those soldiers who were
alert to the enemy archers would have been a lot better off than someone so absorbed in a
religious experience that he might not have been aware of the enemy arrows.”\textsuperscript{172} However,
if one were to put oneself in the soldier’s shoes they might find other naturalistic
experiences less compelling than the threat of enemy arrows as well. The soldier might not
be aware of the chill he feels from the breeze, or the sound of birds flying nearby, either.
Yet, for Mathis, these qualities are compelling naturalistic experiences that prompt a
conscious response from the experiencer.

Instead, I would like to propose that there are levels of cognition. Hick argues
convincingly that cognition happens at the point of perception through a process of
recognition. In this process, the human person also attributes a certain status to that which
is being cognised. In the above example the soldiers are prioritising the enemy arrows over
the hypothetical birds or breeze because of the context in which they find themselves. The
experiences are not mutually exclusive, the soldiers undoubtedly feel the breeze, but so

\textsuperscript{170} Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 63.
\textsuperscript{171} Mathis, \textit{Against John Hick}, 105.
\textsuperscript{172} Mathis, \textit{Against John Hick}, 6.
compelling is the threat of the enemy that they do not cognise or respond to the experience. The same could be said for religious experience as well; the soldiers may well be aware of the divine judgement being visited upon Jerusalem yet in that context their attention and priorities are on purely naturalistic concerns. This thesis argues that Mathis’ example is hardly a compelling argument to dismiss the notion of transcendental experience being equitable to naturalistic experience in such a circumstance.

With a Wittgensteinian understanding of human perception Hick builds upon his Kantian base to highlight the ambiguity of religious experience and the resulting propositional claims. And not just religious ambiguity, but also the ambiguity that is inherent in all sense experience. “A painting, particularly of an abstract kind, can be thought of simply as paint randomly applied to canvas, or experienced-as a great work of art full of sensitivity and expression.”\(^\text{173}\) The same reality may be experienced in a number of different ways and this fits perfectly with his theocentric understanding of the world of religious traditions. Cheetham asserts that this leaves “little room in [his] system for revelation.”\(^\text{174}\) Cheetham is correct to some extent. Hick instead understands revelation not as a series of truths about God, but rather as the experience of the Real through God’s direct action in history.\(^\text{175}\) However, as the emphasis of Hick’s epistemological foundation is on the human person’s capacity to cognise knowledge, even revelation is comprehended subjectively.

When viewed in this way, that the Real is always mediated through the human capacity for perception, no religious appreciation or perspective can be proven to be true, or at least, to contain a greater amount of truth than any other. He highlights that human persons live at an ‘epistemic’ distance from the Real that prohibits such proofs. It is this distance that allows for a free response from human beings rather than enforcing it.\(^\text{176}\) Hick highlights that, within his understanding of epistemic distance, there is the notion that the interpretation of the Real as transcendent is a voluntary response born of faith.\(^\text{177}\) God does not reveal himself unmediated to the perceiver.

\(^{174}\) Cheetham, John Hick, 15.
\(^{175}\) Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 64.
\(^{176}\) Badham, “The Philosophical Theology of John Hick,” 3.
\(^{177}\) Cheetham, John Hick, 59.
The process of becoming aware of God, if it is not to destroy the frail autonomy of the human personality, must involve the individual’s own freely responding insight and assent. Therefore, it is said, God does not become known to us as a reality of the same order as ourselves, for then the finite being would be swallowed by the infinite Being.\textsuperscript{178}

Hick highlights that God must be experienced-as otherwise it would rob the human person of cognitive freedom.\textsuperscript{179} Self-communication of God would otherwise be undeniable. Revelation becomes actualised “when it meets an answering human response of faith.” This is how revelation takes place within the context of Hick’s understanding of experiencing-as. Otherwise, if revelation was unbidden on the part of the receiver, it would violate the cognitive freedom of the receiver. This highlights that the response is necessary.\textsuperscript{180} For Hick, faith, understood as a “distinctively religious experiencing of life as mediating God’s presence and activity” demands the concept of experiencing-as as the cognition of this revelation.\textsuperscript{181}

Understood in this way, epistemic distance further supports the pluralistic view of religions as espoused by Hick. He claims that humans in their individual contexts have developed along different lines and paths. This, in turn, influences how they apprehend and respond to the Real because it changes the way in which they recognise God. Humans are free to open themselves to experience, or to close themselves off, due to the mediated nature of the encounter.\textsuperscript{182} Cheetham highlights the principle of credulity: “in the absence of strong countervailing reasons there is no good reason to doubt our senses.”\textsuperscript{183} What becomes evident, then, is that these religious contexts are self-reinforcing. If the experience of the Real is cognised in the context of one’s own religious tradition and culture it seems clear that the resulting interpretation of this religious experience will be in line with the foundational assumptions of such a tradition. Within Christianity, the Real is understood in

\textsuperscript{178} Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 65.
\textsuperscript{179} Hick, “Faith as Experiencing–As,” 46.
\textsuperscript{180} Hick, “Faith as Experiencing–As,” 46–47.
\textsuperscript{181} Hick, “Faith as Experiencing–As,” 46.  
\textsuperscript{182} Hick, “The New Map of the Universe of Faiths,” 288–89.  
\textsuperscript{183} Cheetham, John Hick, 13.
terms of the Christian God and it seems unlikely that a Christian would take part in a mediated encounter that would overthrow the assumptions of that tradition.

Understood this way, interreligious dialogue enables a collaboration to work toward developing a greater understanding and clarification on each religion’s own interpretation and response to the Real.\textsuperscript{184} Paul Knitter asserts that the aim of a unified pluralistic theory and, thus, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, is an attempt to allow for such a dialogue. He also highlights that, as a result of existing religious contexts that mediate experience, it seems an achievable goal to create an overarching understanding of Ultimate Reality that highlights the validity of all religious traditions without sacrificing the core identity of each one. “The many are called to be one. But it is a one that does not devour the many. The many become one precisely by remaining the many, and the one is brought about by each of the many making its distinct contribution to the others and thus to the whole.”\textsuperscript{185} As such, the differences in religious traditions would not be dissolved by acceptance of such a pluralistic hypothesis and, by employing Hick’s understanding of religious experience, each religious tradition possesses a common core in the experience of Ultimate Reality. However, again, none of these positions would be able to claim to be in possession of greater truth.

Knitter highlights that this dialogue would be extremely beneficial. He asserts that entering into these challenges one is either reaffirmed, or challenged to the point where a worshipper will see their current position as insufficient. “Whereas individualisation is weakened, personalisation is intensified; the individual finds its true self as part of other selves.”\textsuperscript{186} A religious tradition grows in dialogue with the other and, if one accepts Hick’s understanding of experience, finds itself increasingly captured within a particular framework without it. The core motivation behind Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis thus finds itself expressed through his epistemological assumptions. The desire to break down barriers with his pluralistic framework is well underpinned by his understanding of experience as expressed through the Wittgensteinian development of his Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction.

\textsuperscript{184} Knitter, \textit{No Other Name?}, 149.
\textsuperscript{185} Knitter, \textit{No Other Name?}, 9.
\textsuperscript{186} Knitter, \textit{No Other Name?}, 9.
Once again, Hick’s theological and philosophical foundation stems from one key claim: the universe is religiously ambiguous. Hick’s concept of *experiencing-as* highlights the ambiguity of the universe and highlights that this ambiguity can be experienced both religiously and naturalistically. He asserts that, because of this ambiguity, it is completely rational for one who experiences the world religiously should trust this experience as their basis for living and their understanding of what it means to be a human person. While Hick employs Wittgenstein’s *seeing-as* as a stepping stone towards his final position, he moves beyond it and constructs his own understanding of *experiencing-as* and recognition to highlight his own pluralistic perspective. The result is that Hick constructs an understanding of the process of sense perception that explains how religious experience is recognised differently within different contexts. Hick’s concept of *experiencing-as*, however, is still reliant on the Kantian distinction to function.

### 2.6 Concluding Notes

It has become clear over the course of this chapter that Hick relies heavily on his Kantian distinction to overcome the issue of irreconcilable truth claims but it is also evident that Hick uses it as a stepping stone for his own developed epistemology that sees all religious experience as ultimately ambiguous. Kant becomes irretrievable from Hick’s very conception of the constitutive elements that make up a religious tradition as it offers an explanation as to why religions should be seen as finite rather than carrying transcendental authority. It is with the authority of Kant’s distinction that Hick finds himself able to challenge the propositional claims and developed theologies of cumulative traditions.

Of course, this is not what the noumenal/phenomenal distinction was intended to describe. Hick takes Kant’s epistemological insight beyond the bounds of its intended use and applies it to the Real. However, this feels justified when one realises that the emphasis of Hick’s epistemology is not on the object being known but on the capacity of the knower. If all experience falls short of the noumenal world, is it so much of a leap that the Real should be similarly cognised by the human person? Hick does not seem to think so.

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Although the Real is transcendental, if it can be experienced then the human person must cognise that experience with the same capacity and capability that one possesses for any other experience.

However important Kant is, Hick’s interpretation of Kant does not represent the end point of his epistemological development. His development of Wittgenstein’s thought represents an excellent addition to demonstrate how context can effect a significant change in the way experience is cognised. Although Hick moves beyond the boundaries of seeing-as and applies it to all sensory experience, this does not seem like an unreasonable step to take. Hick’s assertion that all experience is experiencing-as should be seen as a development of his understanding of the Kantian distinction and, when viewed as such, elucidates exactly what Hick tries to highlight. The differences between religious traditions act to contextualise religious experience and can account for the resulting differences in religious propositional claims that stem from that religious experience. Therefore, Hick’s epistemology offers a sound basis for the argument that each of the various major religious traditions represents a valid response to transcendental experience.
Chapter 3

Hick’s Theological Conclusions

3.1 Introduction

As this thesis is attempting to construct an understanding of Hick’s use of epistemological claims to underpin his pluralistic hypothesis, it is worthwhile to highlight major dimensions of his philosophical exercise. The previous chapter grappled with Hick’s epistemological claims themselves; however, this chapter will instead turn its attention to the mode in which Hick’s epistemology is expressed throughout his theological conclusions. This will further demonstrate that many of Hick’s conclusions are reliant on an acceptance of his epistemological foundation.

This chapter will focus on Hick’s understanding of a common origin of religious experience, towards which all major religious traditions point. Secondly, Hick’s soteriology will be discussed to highlight how the character of Kant underpins Hicks theological end point. This will demonstrate that Hick sees a traditional Christian soteriology as insufficient and how he overcomes this by applying the soteriological concept to empirical observation. However, we will also demonstrate how the Kantian distinction acts to hinder this positive claim. Hick’s Christology will be examined to demonstrate how propositional claims are understood as being a barrier for equitable validity and, ultimately, how these claims should be seen as human constructions. Finally, this will require a discussion on religious language to elucidate how Hick understands both the status of religious language—as cognitive or non-cognitive—and how it can be justified in his Kantian schema.

3.2 A Common Origin and End-Point

One of the major issues confronting Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is his starting point. Hick relies on fundamental assumptions that are not universally accepted to highlight that
the great religious traditions possess a common origin. Timothy Keller contends that many people reject Hick’s assertion that other religions possess the same amount of good. Nor do they accept that they should be considered valid pathways to salvation. While Hick sees this perspective as the natural conclusion, Keller observes that there are many scholars with well-reasoned arguments who reach very different conclusions. However, if one accepts that there is a significant distinction between the noumenal Real and phenomenal interpretation of it, Hick’s argument for a common origin of religious experience carries significant weight.

The insensibility of the Kantian noumenon functions to limit any positive assertions as to its characteristics. As such, the examination of Hick has been able to establish that grounding an understanding of human perception within Kant’s distinction can support an argument against assigning propositional claims transcendental authority. However, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis seeks to move beyond mere apophatic theology. Hick highlights that the problem of religious pluralism lies within human attitudes towards their tradition’s relationship with Ultimate Reality. For Hick, “when the problem of understanding religious plurality is approached through these rival truth-claims it appears particularly intractable.”

### 3.2.1 A Movement towards Theocentrism

Presented in its most comprehensive form in *An Interpretation of Religion*, the pluralistic hypothesis addresses the nature of the relationship between the Real, the human person, and the varying religious traditions practiced globally. Mathis describes Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis in detail, highlighting his goal to “develop a global, pluralistic, philosophical theology in which some of the major world religions are understood to be variously related to the same divine reality.” However, proof of this assertion is near impossible. For one, the inner workings of a human person’s spiritual relationship with the

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Real are experienced and responded to personally and, as such, are beyond external measurement or perception. Hick, instead, employs empirical practices to measure the fruits of such a relationship. This becomes the main criterion that Hick employs to establish the transcendental origin of all religious experience within the major religious traditions. He observes that there is no great difference in the observable soteriological efficacy of any one tradition and, as such, no tradition can claim a greater access to Ultimate Reality. Gillis observes that this speculation constitutes a significant leap of faith as it is impossible to determine whether a religious tradition possesses superior access to truth. He questions whether Hick has spied the light at the end of the tunnel or is groping in the darkness.

This understanding of transcendental Reality as the point of reference for all great religious traditions constitutes a move from Christocentrism to theocentrism. Christ is no longer seen as normative, and is instead seen as but one expression of Ultimate Reality. This movement constitutes what Hick refers to as a Copernican revolution in religious understanding. The metaphor draws a comparison between Copernicus’ discoveries that the Earth, along with the other planets, all revolved around the Sun. In this metaphor, the transcendental Real is the Sun and the various planets all account for the collection of individual religious traditions. Rather than sitting at the centre, Christianity becomes one of many planets in the structure, orbiting Hick’s Divine Noumenon. Hick asserts that traditional models, in which Christ is seen as the source of universal salvation, do not fit the observed reality. Minor concessions are made— theories of anonymous Christians, or the presence of a lesser truth in other religious traditions—in order to address these issues while still maintaining that Christ is the centre of salvation. “Christianity is the centre of the universe of faiths, and all the other religions are regarded as revolving round it and as being graded in value according to their distance from it.” Hick’s metaphor does not paint inclusivism in a positive light; it suggests this response to pluralism is equivalent to the geocentrists opposition to Copernicus’ evidence. This is not a uniquely Christian position,

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194 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 92.
196 Hick, God Has Many Names, 51.
197 Hick, God Has Many Names, 51.
of course, as Barnes highlights that all traditions see themselves as normative; within Hick’s Copernican metaphor, all religions see themselves as the Earth. He suggests that, when seen this way, it becomes apparent that there must be some doubt that Christianity holds a superior position or access to the truth. For Barnes, when this attitude towards other religions is observed “what we see is simply a final vestige of the old imperialism.”¹⁹⁸ Paul Tillich highlights that there is a distinct need to move beyond the particularities of the Christian tradition in order to account for the changing world. There is a distinct need for religious traditions to re-examine themselves in the face of evidence that countermands how they see themselves within the world of varied religious traditions.¹⁹⁹ Hick’s epistemological foundation is essential for this process. It allows for Christianity to move beyond the particularities of its own tradition and, instead, see itself as one within the global landscape of pathways towards Ultimate Reality.

3.2.2 Theocentrism and Christian Salvation within Hick’s Perspective

Despite this move from Christocentrism to theocentrism, Hick continued to maintain his identity as a Christian. Theocentrism was not a rejection of a religious tradition. Instead, it constituted an understanding of the universe that saw the religious traditions as possessing equal claims to authenticity. Hick urged all Christians to adopt a similar understanding.²⁰⁰ Due to his epistemological underpinning allowing a place for valid, albeit contextualised, responses to transcendental encounter, Hick highlights that this change of outlook does not act to water-down the Christian tradition. Rather, he attempts to highlight the importance of maintaining distinct religious practices while recognising their common source rather than crafting some new, unified religious tradition. Attempting to combine the various traditions has little merit.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Barnes, Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism, 74.
²⁰⁰ Knitter, No Other Name?, 147.
²⁰¹ Cheetham, John Hick, 132.
Tillich argues that “a mixture of religions destroys in each of them the concreteness which gives it its dynamic power.” A synthesis would still be limited by the phenomenal experience that gave rise to it and would threaten to, as Tillich attests, rob each of meaning. Synthesising several accounts does not add to the validity of the theological claim; if each is an authentic response to experience it derives much of its meaning from the context of the viewer. As this experience is conceptualised according to the context of the experiencer, this synthesis would threaten the relevance of the concepts and conclusions that stem from said experience. The resulting global theology would be limited by the same factors that cause the various religious traditions to fall short of capturing the essence of the Divine Noumenon.

Gillis elucidates this very well:

Since different cultures will continue to exist, different religious expressions will also continue. There will still be different styles of worship, different conceptions of basic issues (for example, reincarnation or resurrection), and perhaps most significantly, different ethical systems, all of which will continue to distinguish the religions. So, it is not the emergence of one single world religion that Hick envisages or seeks.

This serves to highlight that Hick’s hypothesis does not seek to establish a relativist, global theology of religions. The theocentric approach that he fosters is underpinned by his own epistemological assumptions which act to allow for many different results from the same encounter. Thus, although Hick does not present significant evidence to claim a common origin of religious experience, he justifies this through his use of Kant’s epistemological insight. This claim to a common origin is further supported by Hick’s claim to a universal soteriological process that takes place in all the major religious traditions.

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202 Tillich, “Christianity Judging Itself,” 120.
203 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 112.
3.3 Hick’s Soteriology

Hick finds the traditional Christian soteriological understanding to be insufficient in accounting for the diversity of religious traditions. The relative number of Christians that make up the world population is decreasing. For a community that traditionally sees itself as possessing the only pathway to salvation, one must see this as a failure to bring about the salvation of the human person.\(^\text{204}\) In light of this, Hick calls for a new understanding of salvation in line with his theocentric understanding of the universe of faiths.\(^\text{205}\) In the second chapter this thesis highlighted Hick’s emphasis on the personal religious dimension over cumulative tradition. It is how the human person understands the operation of reality, and how the human person understands the appropriate mode of living within that reality, that is most important. This personal dimension that Hick highlights emphasises that a core component of religious practice is how the human person understands the correct mode of being, a term that Hick refers to as Reality-centeredness.\(^\text{206}\)

Hick observes that forms of worship within various major religious traditions possess similar experiential characteristics. “That is to say, human beings are coming together to open their minds to a higher reality, which is thought of as the personal creator and Lord of the universe and is making vital moral demands upon the lives of men and women.”\(^\text{207}\) Worshippers of these different traditions experience the same phenomenal processes, even if the form they take seems quite different. This perspective underpins the assumption that these practices are oriented towards the same transcendental Reality, but also that the human person’s understanding of the correct way of “being human” is drawn from a common source.\(^\text{208}\) Hick’s exploration of the soteriological core within the various religious traditions offers some insight into his thinking on this matter.

It is just as difficult to justify the claim of a common soteriological core as the claim that religions share a common transcategorical source of religious experience. The first, and most significant, hurdle is establishing that a soteriological process is taking place. Hick

\(^{204}\) Hick, The Metaphor of God Incarnate, 87.
\(^{205}\) Barnes, Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism, 71.
\(^{206}\) Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 303.
\(^{207}\) Hick, God Has Many Names, 45.
\(^{208}\) Hick, God Has Many Names, 48.
highlights that it is impossible to accurately measure such a claim: How can one quantify a human person’s a relationship with transcendent Reality? Instead, only the observable evidence of such a change can be quantified and, Hick claims, this manifests in a change in relationship towards others. Hick’s soteriological exercise adopts the tone of much of his pluralistic hypothesis. It honours its Kantian foundation and grounds itself in observable, empirical evidence. This is of significant importance as any propositional claim of transcendental nature would struggle against the limits of Hick’s own epistemological claim.

Rather than housed within any tradition, Hick understands salvation universally. He defines it as the “conception of a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better because [it is] rightly related to the Real.” This unsatisfactory state that Hick describes is one that is present in all traditions; there is an intrinsic understanding of the human person as in possession of a flawed nature. He describes this flawed nature manifested in self-centeredness as a state which “pervasively poisons our involvement in the world process, making it to us an experience of anxious, unhappy fulfilment.” Despite their differences, each tradition similarly describes an alternative, correct state that is radically superior to the human person’s naturally flawed condition. For Hick, this change of state manifests in a movement from a position of self-centeredness to one of Reality-centeredness; the human person moves from fallenness into a new life focused on Ultimate Reality. If one accepts Hick’s contention that salvation may be understood this way, then the world religions may also be understood as pathways to this salvation. Each tradition offers a course through which this fundamental change of central focus can be achieved.

Reality-centeredness describes an orientation towards compassion and kindness, which is present in the spectrum of religious traditions. Cheetham highlights Hick’s resulting reasoning: If the faith responses aroused by these worshippers are to be viewed as responses to a transcendental Reality it would be reasonable to assume that these

212 Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 3.
213 Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 32.
responses, independent of any other criteria, are equally valid responses. \(^{214}\) Hick’s soteriological understanding, thus, describes a pursuance of salvation/liberation/fulfilment within the various great religious traditions. For Hick, all the major religious traditions revolve around the attempt to elevate the flawed human person from a position focused on the self. \(^{215}\) Although the pathways are different the ultimacy of each one rests with the Real.

The movement towards Reality-centeredness manifests, to varying degrees, within the life of the human person. It regresses and advances as one is challenged and exposed to new experiences over the course of one’s life. \(^{216}\) Thus, Reality-centeredness cannot be understood as a goal reached through steady progression, but as an ongoing process. Hick asserts that one can observe this process through a common criterion that is present within all major religious traditions, “for they agree in giving a central and normative role to the unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion.” \(^{217}\) One could assert it is as simple as observing the golden rule.

Hans Küng describes it clearly:

*Religions can provide a supreme norm for conscience, that categorical imperative which is immensely important for today’s society, an imperative which obligates in quite a different depth and fundamental way. For all the great religions require observance to something like a ‘golden rule’—a norm which is not just hypothetical and conditioned but is categorical, apodictic and unconditioned—utterly practicable in the face of the extremely complex situation in which the individual or groups must often act. This ‘golden rule’ is*

\(^{214}\) Cheetham, *John Hick*, 133.

\(^{215}\) Gillis, *A Question of Final Belief*, 100.


\(^{217}\) Hick, “Religious pluralism and Salvation,” 56.
already attested by Confucius: What you yourself do not want, do not do to another person.\textsuperscript{218}

For Hick, this soteriological process possesses both a spiritual and a demonstrable moral element, and the golden rule describes the criterion against which to judge this demonstrable element.\textsuperscript{219} This evidence provides Hick with the fruits to support a claim to the soteriological efficacy of the great religious traditions. As no one tradition seems to demonstrate a greater soteriological efficacy, employing this logic, it becomes readily clear that no religious tradition can claim a superior status as a pathway to salvation than any other.\textsuperscript{220} If we accept that no religion possesses a claim to greater morality, or evidence of a greater soteriological achievement, there is little evidence to support a claim to superior access to Ultimate Reality or a correct mode of behaviour. In this way, the lack of evidence to support a claim that any particular tradition instils greater morality in its practitioners than any other underpins Hick’s soteriological argument.

However, such a claim based on empirical evidence finds itself struggling to move beyond its phenomenal foundation. The observation that no tradition demonstrates a soteriological efficacy greater than any other can be supported with empirical evidence. However, that there is a connection between the demonstration of such and a transcendental motive force behind all the great religions is a difficult leap to make. Within Hick’s epistemological framework, no religious tradition can claim a greater access to Ultimate Reality.\textsuperscript{221} But nor can Hick support his claim that there is an Ultimate Reality at play within all religious traditions. Due to the limitation of human knowledge outlined in Hick’s foundation, it becomes just as justified to claim a naturalistic origin for the observed movement towards Reality-centeredness that Hick describes. The origin of the golden rule need not be transcendental in nature; it could just as easily result from simple pragmatism.

Hick’s soteriology is reliant on two major components. 1) Transcendental Reality must be experienced subjectively within the context of the various religious traditions.

\textsuperscript{218} Küng, Global Responsibility, 59.
\textsuperscript{219} Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 309.
\textsuperscript{220} Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” 57.
\textsuperscript{221} Hick, God Has Many Names, 48.
Hick’s epistemological foundation is necessary to account for the different modes in which salvation operates within the various religious traditions. 2) The golden rule is a sufficient criterion to judge whether salvation is taking place within the different religious traditions. If these two criteria are satisfactory, the lack of evidence to support a greater claim to soteriological efficacy in any one tradition supports the conclusion that each religious tradition offers a valid pathway to Reality-centeredness.\(^\text{222}\) However, without the possibility of a knowable Noumenon, a naturalistic explanation appears to be equally reasonable. Hick presupposes a common origin for the various major religious traditions and, without significant evidence of this, Hick cannot sufficiently demonstrate his soteriological claim. It remains a phenomenal observation and cannot say anything substantive about the nature of Ultimate Reality. As such, the motive force behind the soteriological action, within the various major religious traditions, remains elusive.

### 3.4 Hick’s Christology

Human concepts of the correct mode of being human are as varied as the religious claims of the myriad religious traditions. Each one is shaped, conditioned and located within its own culture. Hick highlights that “there is a Chinese way of being human, an African way, an Arab way, a European way and so forth.”\(^\text{223}\) If one accepts that religious experience is contextualised by this culture—and that it is shaped and cognised automatically by the experiencer—then one must accept that this will give rise to different interpretations of this religious experience. This, in turn, develops and shapes religio-cultural concepts of being human, and how the human person relates to Ultimate Reality.\(^\text{224}\) Concepts become inherently connected to culture and, ultimately, they become a core part of how the human person understands their own place. It is through this process that the divinity of Christ has become an integral part of Christian identity.\(^\text{225}\)

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\(^{225}\) Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 42.
However, the underlying principles in Hick’s epistemology require that the Christological question be readdressed.\textsuperscript{226} The doctrine of Incarnation poses a significant barrier for a theocentric model as it places Christianity as the sole tradition founded by God Himself. While the understanding of Christ as God Incarnate does little harm in isolation—and Hick would certainly say that there is little practical difference in either position regarding Christ’s divine status—when understood within the context of religious pluralism the difficulty becomes clear. The denial of astronomy and evolutionary biology through a literalistic interpretation of the Bible provides examples of what can be, in retrospect, seen as failings within the religious tradition of accepting clear evidence that is contrary to a literalistic reading of scripture. For Hick, this failing is being repeated by those who still hold to the Son-of-God language of scripture as something more than poetic or metaphorical. This literalistic reading asserts that Jesus is the sole mediator for Ultimate Reality and fails to recognise the validity of other religious traditions.\textsuperscript{227} For Hick, this means that the vast sum of human persons who have passed into history have not been saved and places Christianity as having exclusive or superior access to the truth.

### 3.4.1 Christ and the Universe of Faiths

Let us return then to Hick’s assertion, based on his Kantian foundation, that each religious tradition possesses an equality valid response to Ultimate Reality. Transcendental experience is culturally conditioned and accounts for the varied responses found within the frameworks of the various, major religious traditions. However, this variation is not just observable inter-religiously, but also intra-religiously. Hick highlights that even within the Christian tradition there is a significant amount of variation in how God is perceived: as Loving Father, Stern Lord, Final Judge. Christ is depicted in a similarly varied way, but each one represents a valid response to how Christians perceive, cognise and respond to Jesus.

\textsuperscript{226} Knitter, \textit{No Other Name?}, 149.

“Different Christian groups, and even different Christian individuals, are worshipping the divine being through the different images of him.”

Hick applies this logic beyond the Christian community and to the global landscape; the many faces of Christ becomes a paradigm for Hick to demonstrate the possibility that Ultimate Reality is present in the various religious traditions. If, within the Christian religio-cultural context—with our similar theological claims and cumulative traditions—Christ can be understood in such a variety of different ways, is it unreasonable to believe that across the many cultures of the world the same Ultimate Reality could be understood differently? Hick says no, it is not unreasonable. In fact, it is likely. He asserts that there is only one God and God is experienced, conceptualised, and reflected upon in a myriad of different ways across the face of the Earth. As such, Hick’s treatment of Christology becomes not just a result of his epistemological foundation, but evidence of it in practice.

The epistemic limits of the human person act to prevent complete, essential conceptualisation of Ultimate Reality. Instead, these interpretations offer incomplete, contextual, historically and geographically situated responses to the Real. Similarly, there is significant tension in the understanding that Jesus is for-all-the-world, but is only seen as mediator for the minority of the Earth’s citizens, and then only within the confines of the human institution of the Christian Church. An examination of Hick’s Christology is important in any examination of pluralistic hypothesis. It represents a logical end-point for Hick’s application of his epistemological foundation and resulting theological conclusions. Given that all religious experience is phenomenal in nature, and recognised according to the experiencer’s context, how can one tradition claim that it was founded by God?

Within the Christian tradition the historic identity of Jesus Christ is elusive. It is an image that is constructed from fragmentary data and material. Often, Christian worshippers use their own desires and imaginations to “fill the gaps” and finish the portrait of the first-century prophet. Their own imaginations, informed by their own historically situated

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228 Hick, God Has Many Names, 48.
229 Hick, God Has Many Names, 48.
230 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 105.
231 Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 183.
contexts, create symbols not entirely representative of Jesus. For Hick, Jesus is a man worshipped by millions, but also a composite of many similar-but-different individuals that bear the same name.\textsuperscript{233} Although there was only one Jesus-the-man, there are uncounted variations of Jesus-the-symbol.

There is little reason to doubt that the first-century Palestinian Jew was undoubtedly a real person, but the individual symbols of Jesus are as reflective of the circumstances of their construction as they are of a historic individual. They stem from the ideological and cultural landscape of their respective contexts in order to meet the varied spiritual needs of the Christian community.\textsuperscript{234} “Aspects of the traditions about Jesus have fused with men’s hopes and desires to form these different ‘pictures’, so that like a great work of art the New Testament figure of Jesus has been able to become many things to many men.”\textsuperscript{235} If they were created purely from imagination, these varied Christologies could be easily refuted, but they appeal to scripture, or Christian teaching to serve as their factual basis. Hick goes so far as to claim that these images of Jesus are more reflections of the worshipper, and the worshipper’s own needs, than are representative of the reality of Jesus. Instead, they become ideals onto which worshippers can project the image of Christ they require.\textsuperscript{236}

There is significant evidence of Hick’s epistemology in this assertion. Just as Wittgenstein’s duck/rabbit is recognised by what the viewer focuses on, is it unreasonable to assume that those aspects of life held to be important by a worshipper are precisely those they recognise in Christ? It seems self-evident that if a human person values a certain dimension of life, this would similarly contribute to their contextual lens. If this is the case, then it seems only natural that the human person would recognise in Christ those characteristics they hold to be important.

For Hick, increased exposure to different religious traditions holds up a mirror to Christianity. By observing the development of non-Christian doctrine and propositional claims, the processes through which they have arisen within the Christian tradition become highlighted. The doctrine of the Incarnation, arising as it did out of the ecclesial debates of

\textsuperscript{233} Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 167.
\textsuperscript{234} Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 168.
\textsuperscript{235} Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 168.
\textsuperscript{236} Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 168.
the early Christian community, is not so different to the deification that takes place in the early doctrines of other traditions. Christ’s unique status becomes difficult to defend when similar figures are highlighted in other religious traditions. Similarly, that Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and the possessor of the unique access to the Ultimate Reality, becomes increasingly implausible as Christians become more connected and more aware of other religious traditions.\(^{237}\) This critical awareness leads Hick to conclude that Jesus was one of *many* revealers of Ultimate Reality, one of only equal importance to the doctrines and prophets of other religious traditions.\(^ {238}\)

### 3.4.2 Christian Superiority

The first chapter of this thesis introduced the concept of misappropriating religious claims to justify amoral acts. For Hick this is a symptom of a cultural claim of superiority that claims unique or superior access to Ultimate Reality. Even as the doctrine of the Incarnation is liable to being misused (as many truth claims may be), Hick is compelled to address the doctrine primarily because of its claim that Christ is normative.\(^ {239}\) Hick’s soteriology claims that rather than being exclusive, Christianity is one among many paths to salvation. As such, with no evidence that Christ confers salvation more readily than other traditions, Hick calls for a new Christology that does not place Jesus in a position of superiority. Instead, he challenges the perception that the Christian Church was founded by the only Son of God to convert the entire human race.\(^ {240}\)

In contrast to Hick’s pluralist conclusion that Christ is one of many revealers of Ultimate Reality, inclusivism simultaneously highlights the possibility and occurrence of salvation within other religious traditions while placing them in a position of inferiority to Christianity. Salvation still stems from Christ and, as such, is an exclusively *Christian* salvation.\(^ {241}\) However, Hick’s assertion that Jesus is only one of many mediators of religious experience places him on an even footing with those found in other traditions, placing the

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tradition in line with his soteriological and theocentric conclusions. Christianity is changing its structure to suit a new perspective that sees itself as one among many valid responses to the Real.\textsuperscript{242} As such, Hick highlights that Christ as the Incarnation is an idea that Christianity is swiftly moving past.

### 3.4.3 Metaphorical Incarnation

The understanding of Christ as Lord, Son of God, and God Incarnate stems from the Greco-Roman context in which he originally appeared. Hick asserts that this traditional perspective is only one way of conceptualising Christ and Christians should be aware of the “optional and the mythological character of this traditional language.”\textsuperscript{243} Examples of similar re-examinations of traditional truth claims abound within the Christian tradition. The Eden narrative finds itself challenged by the development of the theory of evolution just as the claim that “There is no salvation outside the Church” is challenged by poignant questions about those who, because of complications of geography, were not able to hear the gospel.\textsuperscript{244} Alan Race contends that Jesus must be continuously reinterpreted as who he was then with current understandings of history and historiography. By separating the historical Jesus from his religio-cultural setting, the Christian message becomes open to appreciation within the changing religio-cultural environment of the modern world.\textsuperscript{245} Hick agrees, asserting that the development of a new Christology is merely another step in a long road of amendments that must be made in light of compelling evidence.\textsuperscript{246} It is only the inherent conservatism of religion that keeps these attitudes from being challenged.

Hick reasons that if the Gospel had moved into India Jesus would most likely be understood as a Hindu divine Avatar, or as a Buddhist Bodhisattva. His significance would have been contextualised by the community that it found itself in and, within the Greco-
Roman culture of the first century diaspora this manifested as the divine Son of God. The assertion that Jesus is the Son of God has been made in this context, but without sufficient explanation to the meaning of such a claim. Many attempts have been made to go beyond simply asserting the doctrine and have attempted to offer an explanation, but all have been deemed to have fallen short of the reality of Christ’s full divinity and his full humanity. Race asserts that, rather than attempting to elucidate how he should be understood as a result of his dual nature, Christ should be understood as a symbolic figure and how he became a symbolic figure. The insufficiency of any kind of explanatory reasoning makes it difficult to adopt a literal interpretation of Jesus’ divinity. It becomes a statement without substantive meaning. Thus, Hick adopts the position that Jesus’ divinity is metaphorical; it is expressing a feeling or meaning but not making any kind of concrete metaphysical claim.

That is not to say that the incarnational claim is without value. “That Jesus was God the Son Incarnate is not literally true, since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application to Jesus of a mythical concept whose function is analogous to that of the notion of divine sonship ascribed in the ancient world to a king.” Nor does Hick see the elevation of Christ to Godhood in early Christianity as problematic. The early Christian community did their best to represent their understanding of Christ authentically in terminology they could understand: the terminology of ancient Rome. This demonstrates, once again, Hick’s epistemological foundation at work within his theological conclusions. The early Christians used concepts and terminology that were familiar to their religio-social context to represent their own religious experiences.

It is Hick’s own culturally and historically situated perspective of Jesus—as well as his understanding of myth, symbol, and metaphor—that serves to offer a foundation of Hick’s own Christology. This, in turn, deeply impacts how he understands human relationality to the Real. Hick maintains certain fundamental claims about the identity of Jesus: 1) He possessed one nature and it was human, however, he was directed by an *agape* that was

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247 Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 176.
249 Race “The Value of the Symbolic Jesus,” 86.
251 Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 72.
252 Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 150.
God’s; 2) He possessed a human will that was directed by God; 3) He was aware of his relationship with God, but did not see himself as God, or the son of God. These three core claims form the foundation of Hick’s framework of future claims.\textsuperscript{254} Hick asserts that Jesus possessed a special awareness of God and this authority required his disciples to adopt language of appropriate gravitas when speaking of him. To do less would be to undermine their own claims as to the efficacy of his position and authority. “He had to be thought of in a way that was commensurate with the total discipleship which he evoked.”\textsuperscript{255} Adopting the title of Messiah, a term which held special connotations to the first century Jewish community and messianic expectation, Hick asserts that this term eventually developed into a claim to Jesus’ divinity.\textsuperscript{256} However, if one were to be critical of Hick one could assert that what Hick is doing here is simply another case of constructing an image of Christ that meets the needs of the worshipper.

Similarly, Hick maintains a position as a Christian despite his metaphorical understanding of Christ’s divinity.\textsuperscript{257} It must be noted that a change of status of the incarnational claim significantly alters the context in which Christ is understood by the Christian community. With the alteration of a propositional claim, in turn, the cognition of the object of that claim is altered. Within the Wittgensteinian interpretive framework that Hick has constructed, a change in understanding from literal to metaphorical will alter how Christ, and Ultimate Reality, are cognised at the point of perception of experience. Hick contends that the claim that Christ is the literal Incarnation is not supported by an explanation of the mechanisms that make him simultaneously human and God, but does the intelligibility of such a claim matter? This claim still functions to contextualise religious experience even when the explanation as to its inner workings cannot be sufficiently described. When understood within the Wittgensteinian understanding of experience, it becomes clear that the intelligibility of the claim does not matter for the purposes of creating context with which to interpret other phenomena. However, a change in status would significantly alter how Christ functions to contextualise other religious experience.

\textsuperscript{254} Gillis, \textit{A Question of Final Belief}, 75–76.
\textsuperscript{255} Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 173.
\textsuperscript{256} Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 173.
\textsuperscript{257} Knitter, \textit{No Other Name?}, 147.
However, Knitter contends that Christ remains meaningful within Hick’s Christology. He asserts that Hick allows for Christ to remain meaningful to Christians, but simultaneously removes the necessity for Christ to be understood as unique or normative. This stems from “his insistence that Christian belief in the Incarnation and in the divinity of Jesus is mythic and therefore not only allows but demands reinterpretation.” He asserts that Christ’s incarnation and the language that accompanies it should be taken seriously, but not literally. Knitter interprets the metaphorical incarnational understanding employed by Hick as a way for Christians to understand that God is truly encountered in Jesus, and that Jesus can act as a mediator. However, Jesus is not, or may not, be the only true encounter. Jesus becomes essential for the Christian understanding of what it means to be a human person, but it is not a universal norm.

3.4.4 Incompatibility with the God-of-Love

William Lane Craig addresses Hick’s rejection of the literal divinity of Christ over the difficulty of the orthodox position. Specifically, Craig challenges Hick’s soteriological position that results in his rejection of Christ as the literal Incarnation. He asks the question: “What exactly is the problem with God’s condemning persons who adhere to non-Christian religions?” Craig asserts that God does not want anyone to perish, but for all human persons to be saved. It is not a condemnation by God but those who make the free decision to reject Christ and his sacrifice condemn themselves. Salvation, thus, is only placed beyond reach by an act of human rejection. Marilyn Adams highlights that this perspective is inconsistent with the loving God of Christian tradition. She contends that it would not be just for God to punish when punishment was not necessary. A fair case could be made that punishing non-Christians out of their ignorance could be constituted as unnecessary. Hick agrees with this assessment and is more than willing to contend condemning an

259 Knitter, “Theocentric Christology,” 132.
261 William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ,” Faith and Philosophy 6, no. 2 (November 1989): 176.
262 Craig, “No Other Name,” 176.
individual to hell on the basis of geography is absurd.\textsuperscript{264} From Hick’s epistemological perspective, a non-Christian’s religious experience is as authentic to them as a Christian’s is to a Christian. Examining Hick’s program, it becomes hard to believe that any non-Christian would find greater meaning in the Christian tradition than one more situated in their own religio-cultural context.

Conversion is not beyond the realm of possibility, of course. However, if one accepts Hick’s epistemological claims, one can hardly accept that the Christian tradition, connected as it is to European culture, would be convincing. Tillich highlights the history of religious encounter with Islam as a perfect example of this difficulty. Despite repeated attempts to convert the Muslims, they proved to be significantly resistant to what they perceived as a foreign culture.\textsuperscript{265} By asserting that salvation is exclusively through Christ, much of the world’s population is placed in a position where the Christian theological claims carry less truth than those of their own traditions. This does not seem to align with Craig’s assertion of a God that “seeks to draw all men to Himself.”\textsuperscript{266}

Craig appeals to the free will of the human person to highlight his position. It is not the will of God to control what free creatures would do. This includes altering circumstances to ensure that the human person will accept the Gospel.\textsuperscript{267} Craig reasons that God is aware of all possibilities, and what the human person, in light of their free will, would freely choose in any given circumstance. According to Craig’s interpretation of middle knowledge, God considers and weighs every possible circumstance and its ramifications and decides to settle on the particular world God desires.

Robert Adams describes middle knowledge as the awareness of how every free creature will act in any given situation. It is referred to as middle knowledge as it lies between God’s knowledge of all things and his knowledge of his own will, and everything that causally results from it.\textsuperscript{268} However, claims of middle knowledge cannot be seen as true.

\textsuperscript{264} Hick, “On Wilfred Cantwell Smith,” 13.
\textsuperscript{265} Tillich, “Christianity Judging Itself,” 120.
\textsuperscript{266} Craig, “No Other Name,” 175.
\textsuperscript{267} Craig, “No Other Name,” 178, employs Luis Molina’s understanding of middle knowledge to justify this claim.
claims, as Craig asserts. If this were the case, middle knowledge would remove free will. Given a certain set of circumstances, according to middle knowledge, something must happen as a result. As such, middle knowledge asserts two irreconcilable, logical claims—the human person’s decisions are, in any situation, predictable due to their character and dispositions. However, free will dictates that those same traits do not causally affect what decision the human person would make.\(^{269}\) As Adams observes, the necessitation that middle knowledge is trying to circumvent is incompatible with an understanding of free will. For Adams, this is reason enough to doubt middle knowledge.\(^{270}\)

The understanding of religious experience to which Hick holds is similarly inconsistent with Craig’s argument. If one’s ability to understand truth is affected by their own context, how can it be said that they have real freedom of choice in acceptance of Christ? Returning to the cave-man used to elucidate Hick’s concept of *experiencing-as*, one could not expect the caveman to recognise the fork as an eating implement given that it is inconsistent with his previous experience. And if one were to show the caveman its intended use, how would the caveman react? Would he suddenly nod in realisation, accepting the premise that the fork was for eating with? Would that seem like a logical possibility if this caveman had spent his entire life eating with his hands? Why would he adopt a different, alien practice when his own practice has been sufficient and effective up until that point?

Craig’s answer is that it is through Grace that this is actualised. While it is not inherently efficacious in itself, it is efficacious for those who freely cooperate.\(^{271}\) Within Craig’s examination, God makes grace available to those who would freely respond to it. However, this seems problematic, especially if one rejects that middle knowledge makes it possible for God to know how a human person would act in a given set of circumstances. Within Craig’s hypothesis, the Gospel and grace are reserved for those who would convert and is not given to those who would not. Craig asserts, “those who are judged and condemned on the basis of their failure to respond to the light of general revelation cannot legitimately complain of unfairness for their not also receiving the light of special revelation,

\(^{269}\) Adams, “Middle Knowledge,” 116.

\(^{270}\) Adams, “Middle Knowledge,” 110.

\(^{271}\) Craig, “No Other Name,” 179.
since such persons would not have responded to special revelation had they received it.”

However, Knitter observes that if it were God’s will for all people to be saved, he would make it a possibility that this would be the case. It seems illogical for God to seek to draw all human persons in to Himself, yet to withhold the opportunity for the individual to make such a choice.

But how can Christ be the literal, universal pathway to salvation if it is withheld on the basis that one would not convert if they had heard? Craig contends that the responsibility of accepting Christ is the responsibility of the individual, but, Adams denies the claim that God could make free creatures that will always make a specific decision in a certain circumstance. Otherwise, that freedom cannot be true freedom. Does that truly represent freedom of choice? Certainly, the individual technically can choose, but the practical reality is very different; the non-Christian human person’s encounter with Christian tradition will most often be recognised as possessing less truth than a non-Christian tradition the human person has already been born into. Allen Wood offers an insight into Kant’s thinking on the subject: For Kant, “the morally required cannot extend beyond what a rational being might justifiably be convinced of, and no rational being could ever be justifiably convinced of any claim to supernatural revelation.” If this is the case for Kant who provides the epistemological grounding for Hick’s exercise, Craig’s challenge is unconvincing. Although his hypothesis is soundly reasoned and offers an excellent possible account to describe how the God-of-love can be compatible with an exclusivist soteriology, it cannot challenge Hick’s claims on Hick’s own epistemological foundation. Craig’s perspective is irreconcilable with a Kantian/Wittgensteinian understanding of religious experience. To accept his argument requires a rejection of Hick’s epistemological base.

“Transposed into theological terms, the problem which has come to the surface in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions is this: If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is

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272 Craig, “No Other Name,” 51.
274 Robert Adams, “Middle Knowledge,” 117
Christian faith.” To see Christ as a universal mediator of salvation attributes other religions a Christian character, one that fails to respect and recognise their own faith commitment. The assertion that Christ is required for salvation, from Hick’s perspective, is one that owes its roots to Christian obligation to the truth claims of their own tradition. Furthermore, it is a perspective that is inconsistent with the philosophical assumptions that underpin Hick’s philosophical exercise.

With *God Has Many Names*, Hick places his critique of viewing Jesus as the literal Incarnation into the context of his pluralist perspective. He asserts that when Jesus’ divinity is understood metaphorically it removes the necessity of Jesus as a mediator for all humankind but becomes, instead, the mediator for Christianity. Ultimately, building upon Hick’s rejection or refutation of the doctrine of the Incarnation, one cannot infer “from the Christian experience of redemption through Christ, that salvation cannot be experienced in any other way.” Hick offers a compelling perspective as to why the believer should leave room for doubt as to the divinity of Christ as he demonstrates a naturalistic explanation for the development of an incarnational doctrine. However, again, Hick’s Kantian base serves as something of a hindrance for Hick’s own theological conclusions; as a result, Hick should be understood as putting forward a hypothesis that sees the incarnational claim as only one of a number of possible explanations as to why Christ is seen to be the Son of God.

### 3.5 Religious Language

Religious language demonstrates how Hick employs his epistemological assumptions throughout his pluralistic hypothesis. Gillis correctly highlights that it is important to have a firm grasp of the status of religious language within Hick’s framework, “because of Hick’s understanding of myth, symbol, and metaphor that will affect his interpretation of biblical texts in regard to Christology, which Christology in turn will affect his conception of

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278 Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 56.
It is clear that Hick emphasises personal religious experience over propositional claims of the cumulative traditions due to the nature of a religiously ambiguous universe. Instead, his thought lends itself much more readily to a metaphorical or mythological understanding of religious truth claims—as highlighted by his Christology. However, despite Hick’s emphasis on the ambiguity of religious experience, and the secondary position of propositions within the framework of a religious tradition, Hick places a great deal of effort in establishing that religious language is factual in nature. The reality of religious encounter and the factual nature of religious claims are necessary for meaning. This seems counterintuitive considering his emphasis on metaphorical language, and, thus, merits some exploration.

### 3.5.1 Cognitive or Non-Cognitive

Hick observed a growing trend to perceive religious language as non-cognitive in contemporary philosophy, in stark contrast to the traditional religious understanding of language. For the religious person, religious language has historically been veridical in nature and is, thus, cognitive or fact-asserting. Religious language inherently conveys a truth claim that references a transcendent understanding. While Hick contends with the notion that religious truth claims should be taken literally, he makes a strong argument for the veridical nature of religious language. As a result, he constructs a comprehensive argument for the factual basis of religious language. Hick asserts that without a factual basis religious language cannot be used to support claims (Hick uses the example of “God loves mankind”) since they do not carry significant weight or meaning (they are not factual). Without this factual underpinning, religious language becomes meaningless.

However, it is common for philosophers dealing with this question to highlight the finite, human persons that are the motive force behind the institution of religious

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282 This comes into conflict with the myriad of theories of language that have arisen within the twentieth century. Gillis, *A Question of Final Belief*, 60, highlights that many treat religious language as non–cognitive, alongside poetic or emotive language.
While Hick would agree that cumulative tradition is limited in its capacity for conveying Ultimate Truth, it is clear that Hick would strongly disagree with the notion that religious language is non-cognitive. For the sake of discussion, let us unwrap Hick’s assumption: if religion is mundane and constructed from propositions without a factual basis, then the claims of religious traditions are rendered meaningless. Instead, Hick predicates the meaning derived from scripture and within religious traditions upon fundamental, unverifiable claims such as “God exists.” Religious language, thus, owes its cognitive status to its appeal to transcendental experience.

If a religious tradition is not understood to refer to an Ultimate Reality that exists beyond the realms and walls of a religious tradition, then the meaning that is derived from the existence of God is without value. For Hick, religious language is underpinned by the claim that Ultimate Reality exists. It cannot exist “merely as an idea in some men’s minds, but as the creator and sustainer of the universe, the Ultimate Reality with whom we have inescapably to do and whose self-disclosed purpose towards us is supremely good and loving.” For Hick, religious language cannot merely be an explanation of God based on propositional claims, as one would find in systematic theology. It must be based on an awareness of the Real and pointed towards that Reality as a way of life. According to Hick, if the factual foundation of statements about God cannot be verified then “the core conviction of most religions would be lost, because people would not continue to worship and serve a non-existent entity.” Similarly, Mathis asserts that religious language must be considered cognitive if it is referential to a transcendental source. Religious language, when understood as non-cognitive, is often described as a “product of the psychological needs of the language user.” With Hick’s emphasis on attempting to establish the reality of transcendental religious encounters, this would be a major stumbling block. When seen in this way, the image of God becomes a construction of the Christian tradition rather than a valid, albeit subjective, response to an encounter with Ultimate Reality.

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287 Mathis, Against John Hick, 29.
288 Mathis, Against John Hick, 4.
Hick is faced with a significant dilemma. To highlight his Kantian distinction, that each religious tradition must be an equally valid response to a noumenal, transcendental experience, Hick must highlight the finite nature of religious traditions. A naturalistic, anthropological account would render religious language non-cognitive as it would be making claims about a non-existent being. On the other hand, Hick could accept that religious claims are cognitive in nature and referential to a transcendental Being, but this leads to the possibility that propositional claims could be understood as being true. In this case, Hick’s program that sees the various major religious traditions as valid responses to transcendental experience comes under threat. Propositional claims can be seen as literal claims, rather than metaphorical ones, and the Kantian distinction would cease to apply. It becomes clear that, for Hick to establish that there is a transcendental Noumenon that is experienced phenomenally among the various major religious traditions, he must establish the cognitive nature of religious language without undermining his own use of the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction. Religious language must, therefore, constitute a response to religious experience—it is predicated on a personal religious understanding of the human person’s position in reference to Ultimate Reality—while still maintaining a reference to a transcendental truth.

3.5.2 Eschatological Verification

However, Hick finds the concept of verifiability problematic. Can language be considered cognitive—that is, making a claim that is true or false—when that claim cannot be verified? Hick addresses this issue by claiming it is not the verification of such an issue that is necessary. Instead, there need only be the potential for verification. For example, one could assert that there is a lamp in the next room. Until the observer passes into the next room, the existence of the lamp is only verifiable and not verified; however, the statement still has meaning even when the proposition has not been confirmed.\(^{289}\) Thus, language can be understood as cognitive if it is verifiable, not necessarily if it is verified. Religious propositions can, in turn, be seen as cognitive if they are verifiable by experience.

However, this becomes problematic given the ambiguity of religious experience. It would be difficult to claim that experience of God is verification that God exists due to the epistemic distance that Hick highlights. Instead, Hick attempts to answer the challenge of verification through his theory of *eschatological* verification.

Hick postulates that if a human person dies and passes into the afterlife, given that they maintain awareness of their surroundings, they will be able to verify the accuracy of one core factual claim: “God exists.” However, Hick makes it clear that he is not appealing to the traditional doctrine in this claim but towards a “more intelligible possibility.” He asserts that the human person will find himself eschatologically confronted with a situation that unambiguously points towards the reality of the Real. In our current state of religious ambiguity, it may be impossible through religious experience, but Hick asserts that eschatologically verification allows for the proof of the existence or non-existence of Ultimate Reality through “eventual experiential verification.” However, for Mathis, eschatological verification is unnecessary. “If the universe in some complex manner provides the possibility of evidence by which to verify talk about God, the prediction of eschatological verification no longer serves its purpose.” Hick has significant difficulty in finding a sufficient resolution to the issue. He attempts to assert two irreconcilable positions, that religious language can be both cognitive and ambiguous.

In line with Hick’s concept of religious myth, William J. Wainwright highlights that the clear majority of religious statements have no cognitive value. He asserts that experiences can be considered cognitive only if they do not induce someone to make false claims. However, Hick employs his epistemology to account for the varying religious claims that result from contextual interpretation of religious experience. This highlights the significant difficulties that arise from attempting to highlight the fact-asserting nature of religious language while attempting to adhere to a Kantian underpinning.

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290 Hick, “Theology and Verification,” 81.
291 Hick, “Theology and Verification,” 86.
292 Mathis, Against John Hick, 75.
However, Wainwright offers a solution. There is no good reason to perceive religious experience as delusive as it does not actively compel the experiencer to make empirical statements beyond the statement that God exists. Wainwright offers the argument that if religious experience is comparable to sensory experience (as it is within Hick’s epistemological framework) and it is not seen as delusive, then it is reasonable to justify religious experience as cognitive experience.  

3.5.3 Religious Fact and Religious Myth

With the development of a number of theories of language within the twentieth century the fact-asserting status of religious language has become more and more doubtful. Instead, the emotional, personal character of religious language places it as non-cognitive. Hick highlights that Christian writings (scriptures, creeds, and others) of extreme religious importance are understood as containing significant mythological material. This ranges from poetic to moral teachings. Although there will be little agreement on which particular articles are literal and which are myth, Hick makes it clear that it is a commonly accepted reality among Christians that the religious body of literature contains a significant amount of myth and metaphor. Despite this, Hick maintains that it is imperative to assert the factual basis of Christian literature and its central affirmations. He asserts that myth and metaphor are examples of non-cognitive religious expression and should not be taken literally. However, he also contends that some religious language possesses a factual character and should be understood as cognitive. Hick contrasts these two concepts: religious fact and religious myth. While religious myth is symbolic, religious fact acts to underpin and make meaningful these metaphorical claims.

Hick asserts that the mythological material inherent within religious traditions does not undermine or devalue the factual character of the tradition. However, he makes it clear that this is because there is enough fact-asserting material present to underpin the non-

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294 Wainwright, “Mysticism and Sense Perception,” 139.
295 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 60.
297 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 62.
cognitive literature; without it, the poetic language and symbol would lose its meaning and significance. “Myths that are embedded within a body of facts bear this kind of significance secondarily and derivatively, but myths which live in a system which is mythological throughout merely define an imagined realm of their own.”298 As such, myths are reliant on fact-asserting propositions in order to convey meaning or value. Gillis highlights that through this process mythological language and literal language can seemingly be used interchangeably.299 Hick thus attempts to overcome the problem of religious language by claiming that there is a distinction between literal and metaphorical language. Religious fact becomes a framework for the human person to understand their place in reference to Ultimate Reality. Religious myth, instead, conveys feeling and meaning that is supported by cognitive language but can still be interpreted as fact-asserting as it presupposes the cognitive claims it builds upon. Mathis asserts that, independent of religious experience, Hick’s conception of religious experience offers sufficient support to attribute it a cognitive status.300 However, it is clear that the cognitive character of religious language is ultimately reliant on the factual basis of Hick’s assertion that religions are each responding to a veridical encounter with Ultimate Reality.

### 3.6 Concluding Notes

This chapter focused on the major theological conclusions that Hick has drawn and how he justifies them according to his Kantian foundation. It is clear that Hick adopts an *a posteriori* rationale when he attempts to construct his soteriological account. He bases it on the empirical evidence of a common theme that exists within the great religious traditions. Built upon his epistemology, he finds reasoning to account for the differences within religious traditions while still concluding that a real encounter takes place. His soteriology represents the fruit of that claim; Hick highlights the core movement from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness as evidence of unifying experience that the soteriological element of the various major religions reference. Despite its basis in observation and empiricism,

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however, Hick’s soteriology is completely reliant on his epistemological claim; it is this claim that allows for the various religious traditions to share a common core despite conflicting doctrinal claims.

Hick’s Christology is also a result of his core epistemological insight representing an *a priori* conclusion. Hick’s claim that all major religions share a common core finds itself at odds with the traditional Christological claim of the Incarnation. Hick overcomes this barrier by employing his epistemological foundation. He understands Christ’s status as the Son as purely metaphorical in nature and a product of the context in which Christ was encountered. As such, he applies the same logic to Christ that he does to overcome other truth claims. Simultaneously, he offers a rationale to highlight that Christ’s divinity can be metaphorical and still be sufficiently meaningful. This is described in his understanding of religious language as fact-asserting or cognitive. For Hick, this is essential to maintain meaning inherent in religious language that is still reconcilable with his epistemological foundation. However, what becomes clear from this examination is that making a positive claim about the Real, or even that it exists, becomes problematic in the face of Hick’s Kantian schema. Although his understanding of eschatological verification overcomes this, his rationale is insufficient to adequately establish that this is possible.
Chapter 4

Hick’s Epistemology as a Valid Foundation

4.1 Introduction

In the first three chapters, this thesis has established an understanding of Hick’s epistemological foundation and demonstrated how it underpins his theological conclusions. This examination elucidates how Hick’s epistemological insight forms a foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis. In this chapter, we will address the third arising question: “Is Hick’s interpretation and application of these assumptions well-reasoned and valid?” This is particularly difficult to frame as there are many factors to take into consideration, not the least of which is the significant amount of scholarship that surrounds Hicks seminal work.

As a result, this examination must be limited in scope. In order to answer this question within a limited purview, this chapter will respond to critiques of Hick’s philosophical exercise that address his epistemological foundation and demonstrate that Hick’s position is well supported by his epistemological claims. Firstly, we will examine if Hick offers an unbiased perspective in his understanding of the Divine Noumenon. This will demonstrate the inherent theistic character that exists within Hick’s pluralistic framework that proves to be a significant point of criticism. Secondly, we will examine critiques as to whether the world is as religiously ambiguous as Hick asserts. This will demonstrate that Hick provides a sound framework within his epistemology but there are significant difficulties in his application of it. Finally, we will examine if the hypothesis itself is merely a hypothesis or a metaphysical framework that looks to supplant traditional religious understandings. This is especially important as, if this assertion is found to be true, it would place Hick’s hypothesis not as a source for dialogue and a platform for overcoming conflicting truth claims, but as merely another metaphysical understanding to contend with.
4.2 Hick’s Christian Foundation

Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is constructed from a religious perspective. It is intended to explain the phenomenon of religious pluralism that satisfies both a religious and a naturalistic perspective.\(^{301}\) Hick’s critical approach attempts to empirically present a complete and well-thought out argument to present the variety of religious traditions as valid responses to the transcendental Real.\(^{302}\) However, there is little consensus as to whether Hick achieves this goal. As we have stated earlier, Sinkinson contends that Hick owes a debt to Kantian thought that goes far beyond that which he himself acknowledges. Sinkinson highlights that Hick adopts a perspective that is so philosophically grounded that it cannot be understood as theological. In fact, he challenges whether Hick’s philosophical framework can be seen as a Christian account at all.\(^{303}\) Although he founds his evidence for the existence of a Divine Noumenon in religious experience, Sinkinson highlights that this element is just an extension of Kant’s concept of moral experience.\(^{304}\) Hick’s postulation of a Divine Noumenon can thus be accounted for via a Kantian argument, and does not necessitate a religious starting point.

Sinkinson further challenges Hick’s claim to offer a religious account by highlighting Hick’s emphasis on philosophy. Sinkinson observes that throughout Hick’s *Faith and Knowledge*, Hick only quotes scripture eighty-three times. Furthermore, rather than functioning as a starting point, scripture is instead employed to illustrate his arguments. It is readily apparent from Sinkinson’s observations that Hick is reliant upon philosophical reasoning rather than a Christian foundation. “His philosophical account is certainly illustrated by features of the Christian faith, but it does not arise from them.”\(^{305}\) Sinkinson maintains that the religious claims that underlie his theological position are not *Christian* ones. This claim is further justified by the observation that Hick deliberately avoids placing himself within one tradition’s framework. This is evidenced by his adoption of religiously neutral language.\(^{306}\) The non-religious tone and the trans-traditional language employed

\(^{301}\) Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2.
\(^{303}\) Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*, 102.
\(^{304}\) Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*, 102.
\(^{305}\) Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*, 48.
throughout the pluralistic hypothesis lend weight to the argument that Hick’s epistemological foundation underpins his entire philosophical exercise. For Sinkinson, Hick adopts a non-Christian perspective as he attempts to move beyond the boundaries of any tradition. However, there are elements within Hick’s work that betray his own Christian starting point. While Hick’s hypothesis is argued philosophically, Hick finds it difficult to escape his own theistic context as a Christian.

4.2.1 God at the Centre

Hick’s propensity for philosophical thought is evidenced throughout his body of work. “[My] mind showed a certain wilful propensity to philosophy, and to the asking of questions, together with an unsociable habit of noticing flaws in arguments and inconsistencies in accepted belief systems.” For Sinkinson, this is more than a simple tendency; Hick’s body of work itself is removed from his Christian origins. However, D’Costa contends that the pluralistic hypothesis is built upon theistic assumptions. Hick adopts a “covert Ptolemaic position” within his philosophical exercise. Most notably, this character is evidenced within Hick’s conception of Ultimate Reality, or the Divine Noumenon, that sits at the centre of his Copernican framework. D’Costa suggests that this concept is not as religiously ambiguous as Hick would like to suggest.

Ultimate Reality within Hick’s epistemological framework exists beyond the conception of the human person. It cannot be attributed substantive metaphysical characteristics, as it exceeds conception and the capacity of human knowing. However, D’Costa observes that at the centre of Hick’s Copernican framework exists a God-of-love which functions to underpin many of Hick’s theological conclusions. Hick’s universal

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307 Sinkinson, The Universe of Faiths, 17.
308 Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 1.
310 The best example of this is the assertion in Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 246, that the Real is transcategorical and, thus, the understanding of the Real as personae or impersonae are not irreconcilable religious perspectives.
311 D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 110, observes that the movement towards a Reality-centered and correct way of being within the world of religions, D’Costa argues, stems from Hick’s Christian soteriological understanding.
soteriological claim functions only by claiming that religions are referential to a loving God. Hick’s concept of Reality-centeredness is framed as a movement towards compassion and kindness, with Ultimate Reality as the motive force.

This theistic character is evidenced throughout the theological conclusions that result from Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis. Mathis identifies Hick’s religious starting point and maintains that it is present throughout his philosophical exercise. “Broad as it is, it constitutes a sustained defence of a theistic understanding of the universe.”312 This Christian character of his work may be up for debate, but that there is a theistic, loving Being at its heart is not.313 Whether Hick’s exercise is Christian or not does not affect its purpose; Gillis observes that the aim is not to supplant the Christian theological understanding with a philosophical or naturalistic one, but it is to demonstrate that there is sufficient cause to doubt whether the Christian perspective offers a superior or exclusive response to the Real.314 However, the problem arises not from the hypothesis’ compatibility with a Christian perspective, but a non-theistic one.

According to Hick, Ultimate Reality is transcategorical, exceeding and surpassing any kind of metaphysical claim. However, D’Costa notes that Hick’s conception of the Divine Noumenon as a loving Being places him at odds with a number of theistic and non-theistic understandings of transcendental Reality.315 Hick’s theological conclusions within his Christology, soteriology, theodicy, and religious language move him away from his own Kantian, epistemological starting point. In advancing his soteriological position, Hick is inherently denying and contradicting other accounts that are incompatible with this perspective.316 Harold Netland observes that Hick’s philosophical exercise contradicts theological positions while simultaneously holding that they are not in conflict. He finds that Hick’s attempts to reconcile his own pluralistic perspective with these traditions necessitates a reinterpretation of various religious claims, distorting the traditions that Hick

312 Mathis, Against John Hick, 1.
313 D’Costa, John Hick’s Theology of Religions, 109.
314 Gillis, A Question of Final Belief, 123.
is trying to incorporate into his global framework.\textsuperscript{317} The metaphorical understanding of Christ’s Incarnational nature is a prime example of this synthesis.

Netland is highlighting a dimension of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis that seems to subvert the claims of various religious traditions that are irreconcilable with Hick’s own framework. In “The impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” D’Costa argues that pluralism represents a form of exclusivism rather than being a truly open dialogue.\textsuperscript{318} Paul Copan adopts a similar position, highlighting that the various traditions all become subordinate to the metaphysical claims of religious pluralism.\textsuperscript{319} As Marilyn McCord Adams eloquently points out, Hick’s hypothesis “sounds oddly parallel to religious practitioners advancing theirs as the one true faith.”\textsuperscript{320} Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, and the reinterpretation of religious claims that conflict with his schema, seem to offer an example of this perspective. This is counterproductive for the practical dimension of Hick’s hypothesis. If it aims to allow for dialogue and harmony between religious traditions, the perceived exclusivism of the hypothesis would be a significant barrier. Paul Knitter highlights the practical drawback of subverting another’s religious claims with one’s own perspective: Dialogue becomes akin to a conversation between a cat and a mouse. “Not only is the cat the pre-established winner, but also it will be difficult for the cat, during the dialogue, really to listen and learn from the mouse, especially when the mouse says something that does not fit the cat’s ‘last word.’”\textsuperscript{321} Within Hick’s hypothesis the God-of-love acts as the ultimate referent of any religious tradition as his own religious context is expressed within his universal framework.\textsuperscript{322} This becomes problematic, as Hick’s conception of the Copernican universe of faiths is just as irreconcilable with some religious perspectives as any religious tradition. His attempt to account for the propositional claims of the various religious traditions becomes a truth claim of its own.

\textsuperscript{317} Netland, “Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth,” 86.
\textsuperscript{318} Gavin D’Costa, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” 223–32, argues this point eloquently and challenges the sufficiency of the tripartite typology he once championed.
\textsuperscript{321} Knitter, “Response to Reviews of "No Other Name?,” 132–33.
\textsuperscript{322} D’Costa, “John Hick’s Copernican Revolution,” 329.
Although Hick holds that salvation is not exclusively Christian in character, and is actively taking place in other religious traditions, he does little more than observe evidence of a general teaching of selflessness within the multitude of religious traditions. Mathis holds that the criterion that Hick employs in his observation is drawn from the Christian tradition. The golden rule that he observes is highlighted because of values that Hick himself holds. The soteriological efficacy that Hick observes in the varied non-Christian traditions is judged by Christian criteria. Although Hick is attempting to reconcile various perspectives, he ultimately demonstrates that his own hypothesis is as indebted to his own cumulative tradition as any other.

4.2.2 Hick’s Positive Claims of the Real

With *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick attempts to move away from the God-of-love terminology he employs by adopting more religiously neutral language. Paul Rhodes Eddy observes that this does not constitute a significant change in the content and the character of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, despite this change of terminology. As such, Eddy observes the same underlying Christian character of the Real within Hick’s mature work that D’Costa argues constitutes a covert Ptolemaic position. This problem goes beyond bringing Hick’s hypothesis into conflict with non-theistic traditions—it potentially conflicts with its own Kantian epistemological foundation. Eddy observes that Hick allows for formal, logically generated statements regarding the Real expressed within *Interpretation*, where Hick highlights that “it would not make sense to say that none of our concepts apply to it.” He justifies this with the logic that, in order to refer to something, it must possess the characteristic of being able to be referred to). While Hick may surely apply formal logical concepts such as “being able to be referred to” it is another thing altogether to associate

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323 Mathis, Against John Hick, 172.
324 Eddy, John Hick’s Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions, 111.
325 Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 239.
the Real with our finite human concepts of selflessness, or love, as the Divine Noumenon within Hick’s schema exceeds human conceptualisation.326

This thesis strongly agrees with Eddy. If Hick allows for substantive claims to be made of the Real then his pluralistic paradigm and its Kantian foundation are betrayed. However, to disallow anything substantive to be said of the Real also risks rendering it meaningless. Eddy comes to this conclusion by employing Ludwig Feuerbach in asserting that to deny all the qualities of a being is equivalent to denying the being itself. “Hick is destined to walk in a neo-Kantian no man’s land that lies somewhere in an imaginary space between religious realism and a thoroughly subjectified non-realism.”327 Hick becomes reluctant to make any kind of positive claim in order to maintain his notion of epistemic distance from the Real, unless he feels as though it is supported by empirical evidence, such as within his soteriological observations. However, by using this phenomenological observation to postulate about the nature of the Noumenon, Hick is engaging in metaphysical speculation and applying human concepts to Ultimate Reality. The leap he makes goes beyond the evidence and postulates about the nature of the transcendental itself. Alvin Plantinga notes that there is a significant problem with Hick’s assertion that no substantive claims can be made of the Divine Noumenon.328 In Plantinga’s reading of Hick, the Divine Noumenon has a causal relationship with human experience, but it becomes unclear if this constitutes actual experience or perception of Ultimate Reality. There exists within Hick’s hypothesis an ambiguity as to which concepts can be applied to the Noumenon, and which cannot. Plantinga notes that the distinction is seemingly arbitrary.329

4.2.3 Hick’s Interpretation of Kant

Plantinga’s evaluation stems from his interpretation of Hick’s Kantian reading which adopts the two-world interpretation—the phenomenal world and noumenal world are

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326 Alvin Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 45, examines Hick’s claims of this nature. Plantinga asserts that one should be able to make substantive claims of the Real such as ‘The Real is not a tricycle’ and other, seemingly innocent observations. These literal claims, for Plantinga, highlight that other, more positive claims can be made about the real.
327 Eddy, John Hick’s Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions, 171.
328 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 44
329 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 45.
separated and divided into that which our conception literally applies and the world that is beyond. However, Philip L. Quinn offers an alternative perspective. Hick claims that he moves beyond his Kantian boundaries, but how he interprets the Kantian insight is still critically important to his schema. Within Hick’s thought the noumenal Real is not directly known but the human person encounters it in a real way, albeit contextually. Quinn highlights that this describes how the Real manifests both personally, and impersonally, in different religious traditions. With the two-world model Hick’s epistemological foundation functions to describe a single noumenal Real with many phenomenal Reals, products of the singular encountering varied traditions. According to Quinn, this is evidenced throughout Hick’s proposal. The noumenal Real is not directly experienced but it contributes to the creation of phenomenal impressions. Religious concepts can be said to be authentic responses but not necessarily representative of the Real an sich. Problematically, it also cannot be said how much of the phenomenal reflection of the Real is authentic and how much is illusory or crafted from context.

Alternatively, an interpretation using the disguise model would be an authentic representation of the noumenal Real but one where some of the Real is obfuscated. The experiencer does not and cannot gain a complete insight. Quinn highlights that Hick seems to employ both the two-world model that Plantinga observes and the disguise model. An assertion that the noumenal Real is experienced through our humanly-experienced concepts falls in line with the disguise model. However, the two-world model establishes that the Real is unexperiencable and beyond conception. Within this schema, the noumenal Real remains unexperienced and the various religious traditions possess valid truth claims of the phenomenal reals of their traditions, but these concepts cannot be applied to the independent, transcendent, noumenal Real. However, Ankur Barua asserts that Hick rejects the two-world interpretation of the Kantian distinction. He highlights

330 Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 44.
331 Quinn, “Towards Thinner Theologies,” 147.
336 Quinn, “Towards Thinner Theologies,” 150.
that there is no distinction between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world within Hick’s schema, citing Hick’s claim in *An Interpretation of Religion* that “the phenomenal world is that same noumenal world as it appears to our human consciousness.”  

George Mavrodes seems to adopt the two-world perspective, as well, even if he does not express it in those words: “I now suspect, that is, that Hick (despite what he sometimes says) does not think that the Gods, etc., of the actual religions Allah, Shiva, Brahman, the Holy Trinity, and so on are real at all.”  However, he takes it to the extreme and places the phenomenal Real in the same categories as other abstract concepts and fictional characters: less tangible and real than physical objects. He reasons that it seems unsatisfactory for philosophers to highlight that these illusory beings have an effect on “affairs in the ordinary world.” For Hick, the Real is reasoned as a result of the existence of these characters: a non-arbitrary postulation grounded in the existence of religious experience and religious life. This seems not so different from Kant’s understanding of Noumena in relationship to phenomena, even if Mavrodes would like to draw a sharp distinction between Kant and Hick’s use of the terms. It is clear that there is no real consensus as to how Hick interprets the Kantian distinction within his own work, nor how he explains how the Real is understood by the human person. However, Quinn’s suggestion that Hick adopts aspects from two distinct readings of Kant seems the most likely and is quite warranted; Hick is taking Kant’s epistemological insight beyond its original confines and applying it to distinguish between phenomenal experience and the Divine Noumenon. As such, in this unique circumstance, Hick’s interpretation is justified in taking a unique approach.

### 4.2.4 Kant’s Justification of the Existence of God

Paul Rhodes Eddy observes that Hick’s metaphysical speculation is distinctly problematic as Hick’s epistemological perspective seems to render the existence of the Divine Noumenon unnecessary. “Hick’s appeal to a non-human, transcendentally-derived

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component in religious experience does not vitiate the radical subjectivism of his proposal.” If cumulative tradition forms the context for the human person’s religious experience, then how can one know what is of finite origin and what is distinctly transcendental? Religious experience is cognised in the same way as sensory experience, but Hick does not delineate how the human person may distinguish between them. Hick’s epistemology provides no evidence to support a claim of being referential to a Divine Noumenon. If Hick’s epistemology is enough cause to doubt the truth of Christian propositional claims, could it not be employed beyond this to argue that religious experience may not stem from the Real at all? Returning to Eddy’s Feuerbachian claim, one could argue that without the capacity to make positive claims vis-à-vis the Real, the human person cannot have knowledge of Ultimate Reality. Thus, within Hick’s framework, the human person cannot know if the Divine Noumenon exists.

However, this is still phenomenological evidence employed to support a transcendental proposition. How can a substantive claim be made in light of this? Eddy takes Hick’s position to be comprised of two elements: 1) Hick states, firstly, that he is not completely beholden to every aspect of the Kantian distinction; 2) Nor can he accept that within his framework it would be logical to assume that a religion’s cumulative tradition and the practitioner themselves could supply the entirety of the religious experience independent of transcendental participation. Hick argues that Eddy’s Feuerbachian account fails to take into account the distinction between belief in a transcendental Reality and finite proofs of such a Reality. This is in line with the normal mode of operation for his pluralistic hypothesis. Despite this response, Eddy reaches the same conclusion as D’Costa: Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis possesses a character of covert monotheism. He cites Hick’s epistemology as one that sees a personal relationship between the Real and humankind, human freedom, and the necessity of an epistemic distance to maintain it. These are core characteristics to be found within the Christian tradition and are obvious

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346 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2, offers an account that could be taken naturalistically, but that does not prevent a belief that Ultimate Reality is experienced within the various religious traditions.
examples of indebtedness to his Christian perspective. However, Hick’s epistemology is not entirely at odds with the claim that the Real exists. Alvin Plantinga observes that within Kant’s schema there is sufficient room for the existence of a theistic deity. Kant suggests that the transcategorical nature of God is not problematic as the inaccessibility of knowledge-about-God makes faith possible.\textsuperscript{348} With the awareness that Kant’s concept of moral experience forms part of Hick’s religious experience, one can look deeper into Kant’s body of work to find how he offers a rationale to warrant a theistic belief.

Denis Savage offers an observation regarding how Kant describes law in his comparison between Kant and Aquinas. While Aquinas asserts that there is valid, theoretical proof of God’s existence, Kant relies instead on a moralistic proof.\textsuperscript{349} The divine law that Aquinas ascribes to revelation from God equates to the law in the Old and New Testaments. This revelation is \textit{materially} impossible within Kant’s schema due to the limits of sensibility and the capacity of the human person. However, alongside this divine law Kant also highlights the eternal law, which both Aquinas and he see as being derived from God. Savage highlights that Kant understands this as the basis of our humanity and personality that forms our own moral nature.\textsuperscript{350} If one takes the Kantian distinction between eternal law and divine law, then one begins to see something akin to the noumenal/phenomenal distinction at play. Kant, similarly to Hick, observes a commonality within human morality that he uses to presuppose the existence of God. If this commonality is observable and expresses itself finitely, even if Kant feels justified in ascribing the origin of this moral commonality to God, then it would be difficult to argue that a similar claim by Hick within his soteriology is not being true to his epistemological foundation.

What we see here are conflicting accounts over the underlying character of Hick. While Sinkinson asserts a purely philosophical approach that is obviously unchristian in character, D’Costa and Eddy observe that Hick’s approach is still founded within his Christian identity and possesses a covert monotheism at its core. However, this thesis contends that these positions are not completely irreconcilable. Nor do these positions conflict with Hick’s

\textsuperscript{348} Plantinga, \textit{Warranted Christian Belief}, 17.
\textsuperscript{350} Savage, “Kant’s Rejection of Divine Revelation,” 56.
epistemological foundation. Sinkinson observes that Hick’s character cannot be theologically neutral—a position which Hick’s own insight supports. According to Hick, experience of any kind is invariably affected by context and, as such, Hick’s own observations cannot be theologically neutral. Sinkinson also asserts that the theological bias that Hick possesses is not a Christian one and, again, his argument is persuasive. At least, if one agrees with Sinkinson’s assessment of what constitutes a Christian theologian: someone “whose work is founded on a biblical, confessional expression of Christianity.” Sinkinson goes on to argue that Hick’s underlying assumptions are not Christian in nature, but it must be said that they possess a significant, demonstrable similarity to a Christian understanding of the Real. Eddy and D’Costa both adopt this position and it is a convincing one; Hick’s God-of-Love at the centre of his Copernican framework seems inseparable from the Christian understanding of God.

As stated above, it is impossible to free oneself from one’s context, so Hick relies on his own experience and observation in the construction of his pluralistic framework. From the reading of Kant’s perspective of Divine Law, and its relationship with morality, it’s reasonable to affirm that it would not be non-Kantian to highlight commonalities in the behaviour and values of human persons to construct a certain understanding of the Real. As Sinkinson observed previously, Kant’s moral experience (which he uses as a basis for his claim as to the existence of God) fits within the category of Hick’s religious experience. However, it becomes problematic when it moves beyond mere observation of commonalities to the substantive claims that are observable within Hick’s soteriological exercise. Hick asserts a religiously ambiguous world but then proposes caveats where religion is not ambiguous, and the nature of the Divine can be affirmed by observation and empirical evidence. By making such a claim, Hick threatens to undermine his whole exercise. As such, we must conclude that Hick’s metaphysical claims are not well-reasoned or valid according to his own epistemology.

4.3 Is the World Really Religiously Ambiguous?

William P. Alston highlights the principle of credulity within Hick’s work, stating that “When a person believes that God is experientially present to him, that belief is justified unless the subject has sufficient reasons to suppose it to be false or to suppose that the experience is not, in these circumstances, sufficiently indicative of the truth of the belief.” He highlights that if religious experience is perceived in the same way as sensory perception, then the result should follow the same rationality. If the human person perceives something, that perception is justified until a point where it is convincingly demonstrated to be false. Wittgenstein reasons that sensory perception is significantly altered at the point of cognition by the experiencer’s personal context. Given the ambiguity of sensory perception, can religious experience be said to operate the same way? As such, is the world religiously ambiguous?

In Chapter 2, this thesis established that the ambiguity of religious experience is the end-point of Hick’s epistemology and the foundation of his philosophical framework. Hick attempts to justify his position by citing Aquinas, claiming that all knowledge is known in the mode of the knower. However, Gillis highlights that Hick’s use of Aquinas to justify his Kantian position is not entirely accurate, and this is the justification that he employs to raise his Kantian epistemology to apply to the Divine Noumenon. Gillis asserts that, to the contrary, “Aquinas thought that one could have knowledge of God, albeit not full knowledge since Aquinas wrote that ‘it must be granted absolutely that the blessed see the essence of God.’” He asserts that while Aquinas understood that God’s essence was beyond the human person’s capacity to understand or comprehend, that, however, did not represent the end of Aquinas’ thought on the matter. Instead, grace was the deciding factor that granted knowledge of God where human finitude acted to prevent it. Gillis is quick to argue that Hick ignores grace and revelation in his philosophical exercise as he is playing the

role of the philosopher rather than that of a theologian.\cite{Gillis145} The ambiguity of religious experience is ensured within Hick’s schema only as Hick does not allow for grace.

Paul Copan attempts to meet Hick on his own terms, but offers an argument from observation and reasoning to refute Hick’s pluralistic theory. Copan’s argument stems from an assertion that there is significant evidence to support the claim of a personal creator of the universe. This claim, if more convincing than Hick’s hypothesis, would be cause to doubt the validity of Hick’s epistemological claims.\cite{Copan141} Copan, in his examination of Hick’s thesis, comes to the conclusion that he should follow Hick’s suggestion that those who find his pluralistic platform lacking should construct a better one.\cite{Copan142} As such, he attempts to demonstrate that a singular, personal Being as creator of the universe is reconcilable with observed reality much more readily than Hick’s religiously ambiguous universe.

Copan attempts to argue that “a personalist God’s existence helps us make the best overall sense of these fundamental phenomena.”\cite{Copan144} Copan adopts a Kalam cosmological argument, similar to that of William Lane Craig, in order to highlight that a theistic perspective offers a more compelling account of the creation of the universe than Hick’s ambiguous one.\cite{Copan145} It justifies and highlights the source of the universe’s birth as the action of God rather than, he asserts, the only avenue for atheists to take: that the universe sprang from nothing and with no cause.\cite{Copan146} However, this is something that is easily disputed: the naturalistic perspective does not highlight that the universe necessarily came from nothing and with no cause, but highlights that they do not know the cause as the models that are available for the naturalistic understanding of the universe break down in that environment.\cite{Oppy145}
Copan asserts that “something spaceless, immaterial, and very powerful brought the universe into existence” and employs this as justification for a personal Being as motive force behind the universe’ birth. However, Graham Oppy contends with the base claim that the universe itself must have a cause. While it may seem intuitive and obvious from personal experience, he believes there are sound grounds to contend with this assumption. At the beginning of the universe, the laws of physics seem to break down, including our understanding of time. While it may seem logical that every act of creation must have a root cause, every created thing is also preceded by a time in which it had yet to be created. However, this is not the case with the universe as the beginning of the universe also marked the beginning of time. Accordingly, Oppy contends that a cosmological argument for a First Cause should be rejected. A personal Being as motive force behind the creation of the universe is not more compelling than any other account as, at the point of creation, the human person’s understanding of the operation of the universe begins to break down.

Despite this reality, Copan asserts that something that was spaceless, immaterial, and very powerful created the universe. However, this thesis contends that this claim does not invalidate Hick’s Kantian distinction or his thesis—in fact, if the world is religiously ambiguous this would account for Copan’s personalist account quite well. 1) There is an unknown force that acted previous to the creation of the universe; 2) As this force acted previous to/at the moment of the universe’s creation we cannot know its properties; and 3) As the world is religiously experienced a theist would naturally ascribe this action to a personal Being. Roy Jackson contends that the motive force behind the universe’s origins will be seen as theistic if one is a theist. However, a non-theist may require no explanation at all. As such, Copan’s argument does not offer a compelling account to contend with the ambiguity of the universe and, in fact, fits neatly within Hick’s pluralistic schema.

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kind. Consequently, we are in no position to draw any conclusions about the very earliest parts of the universe from the current state of cosmological theorising.”

363 Copan, “Why the World is Not Religiously Ambiguous,” 146.
365 Oppy, Arguing About Gods, 149.
Similarly, Copan’s moral arguments find a place within Hick’s pluralistic framework. He emphasises that there must exist a good *personal* Being that exists for which our morality is referential. What Copan seems to argue is that it is reasonable for someone to infer that the Ultimate Reality is a personal Being. Copan’s position can be accounted for within Hick’s epistemological framework once again. He makes no argument that seems to refute that it is anything other than a contextual observation as a Christian, with which Hick would not disagree. Copan’s argument that a personal Being as the motive force behind creation does not act to dismiss Hick’s claim of religious ambiguity. In fact, what becomes clear through this examination is that Hick’s epistemological assumptions account for such claims and provide for easy reconciliation within the pluralistic framework. According to Hick’s schema, Copan observes a personal motive force behind the creation of the universe as a result of his own context. As such, his argument does not offer a more compelling account of how the human person experiences reality than does Hick’s epistemology.

### 4.4 Ineffability

Eddy, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine,” contends that Hick’s epistemology undermines his exercise. He asserts that the Divine Noumenon is completely unnecessary within Hick’s schema, as religious experience can be accounted for in naturalistic terms. He highlights that “characterization of Hick’s position as a ‘transcendental agnosticism’ is more than accurate.” Similarly, Kenneth Surin observes that Hick never attempts to elucidate how one secures access to the Divine Noumenon. Theology is a product of the phenomenal world, yet Hick does not describe the mode in which noumenal truth is conveyed. Ultimately, the Divine Noumenon, whether it exists or not, compels no belief and is both unnecessary and contingent. He highlights that Hick is walking on a tightrope whereby he attempts to hold truth just far enough out of reach to allow for a common core.

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367 Copan, “Why the World is Not Religiously Ambiguous,” 146.
for all religious traditions, but not so far as to render religious images completely illusory.\textsuperscript{371} His use of the Kantian insight, for Eddy, takes subjectivity far beyond the normal bounds to the point where no claims can be made of Ultimate Reality whatsoever.

Hick responds by highlighting that the ineffability of the Real is not such a bleak concept as Eddy would have it. Hick highlights that Eddy is offering what would be considered a naturalistic argument, one that could be equally offered as criticism against any particular religious tradition.\textsuperscript{372} For Hick, a religious account must always stem from experience and a response to the transcendent.\textsuperscript{373} As such, Hick attempts to elucidate philosophically an account which highlights how religious plurality might be accounted for from a religious perspective. Mark Heim contends that in order for any of Hick’s theological conclusions to operate, experience must refer to a transcendental Reality, and this is the sole significant religious claim within Hick’s body of work.\textsuperscript{374} As such, within Hick’s schema the transcendental Real is completely necessary. It is what defines the pluralistic hypothesis as a religious exercise at all.

\section*{4.5 The Hypothetical Nature of the Pluralistic Hypothesis}

As we have seen over the course of this chapter one of the major components to the opposition to religious pluralism seems to stem from the hypocrisy of metaphysical speculation despite the Kantian distinction acting to impede any such exercise. To address this issue, James L. Fredericks attempts to grapple with Hick’s philosophy of religion and attempts to evaluate it using two criteria. Although he finds Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis wanting, he offers excellent insight into Hick’s use of Kant and attempts to elucidate how the two thinkers are similar.

Fredericks highlights that Kant has been extremely influential in the field of philosophy. His insight into the subjectivity of knowledge has had considerable impact and many would accept it as a self-evident reality to some degree. When dealing with

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\textsuperscript{371} Eddy, “Religious pluralism and the divine,” 475.
\textsuperscript{372} Hick, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine,” 419.
\textsuperscript{373} Hick, “Religious Pluralism and the Divine,” 418.
\textsuperscript{374} Heim, “The Pluralistic Hypothesis, Realism, and Post-Eschatology,” 211.
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transcendental Reality this is exacerbated as God is always known imperfectly and surpasses all human conception. Hick offers a perspective that sees the various great religious traditions as interpretive tools to help make sense of religious experience. “Religions are like models in physics or maps in geography.” In *Faith among Faiths*, Fredericks contends that Hick’s philosophical framework sees itself as defining the nature of reality to the various religious traditions, however, this thesis argues that the pluralistic hypothesis is far more similar to how Fredericks portrays Hick’s view of religious traditions: it is a model in physics, or a map in geography, that attempts to aid in understanding human relationality to the divine.

Fredericks proposes two criteria regarding the adequacy of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis. The first is that it must be accountable to the demands of the Christian tradition. The second, which he argues is as important as the first, is that it must empower Christians to respond creatively to the challenge and opportunity posed by religious diversity today. Fredericks argues that there should be significant concern over the first criterion, but also that Hick fails to meet the demands of the second. He bases this assessment on the observation that Kant’s distinction is a naturalist argument.

In his assessment of Hick’s platform, Fredericks refers to the story of the six blind men and the elephant. In the story, six blind men all touch an elephant, each one is in contact with a different part; the man touching the trunk perceives the elephant as being similar to a snake; the man touching the elephant’s leg perceives it as being a great, leathery tree; and the one touching its side perceives the elephant to be a great wall. All are touching the same animal yet perceive it in distinctly different ways. This story is often described as being analogous to religious experience. The many different men are all experiencing the divine, but such is their limitation that they all experience it finitely and all perceive it differently.

The common argument that Fredericks employs here is that, according to this metaphor, Hick sees himself as being the only one who is not blind. He professes to be the

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376 Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 47.
only one who can see the elephant for what it is, and is helplessly observing the blind men
grope about in darkness. Here Fredericks is asserting that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis places
itself above the various religious traditions that cannot see that they are all referring to the
same noumenal Real and, in so doing, is making a substantive metaphysical claim at odds
with his own Kantian distinction. However, this thesis contends that this is not the case. Hick
himself addresses this claim in Problems of Religious Pluralism, asserting that there is no
vantage point from which the human person can objectively see the truth of transcendental
Reality. Hick highlights that the position he is adopting is simply a hypothesis that he has
arrived at inductively.\textsuperscript{379}

As we have seen, Hick appeals to human perception as the epistemological base of his
philosophical argument. In Chapter 2 we demonstrated how Hick employs this
understanding as a base for his hypothesis and uses his resulting concept of religious
ambiguity to make metaphysical claims about the nature of the Real. However, Hick also
asserts that his pluralistic hypothesis represents nothing more than a “ground plan” and
that his metaphysical speculation results from some interpretations that could be inferred
from it.\textsuperscript{380} Fredericks contends that Hick is dodging responsibility for his claims, but,
similarly, he recognises that adopting this position is necessary considering the nature of
Hick’s exercise. “This claim, however, is not a simple assertion, for this would be taken as
dogmatic as exclusivism and inclusivism. Rather the claim should be taken as a hypothesis
only.”\textsuperscript{381} Fredericks, however, does not believe that it is simply a hypothesis.

He acknowledges that it is built \textit{like} a hypothesis, from inductive reasoning and data,
and that it represents a sensible and cogent way to account for all the data. However,
Fredericks claims that there is another important criterion that must be satisfied. Fredericks
asserts that a hypothesis requires a method in which it might be proven wrong. For
Fredericks, “If there is no way for a hypothesis to be disproved, it cannot rightly be
considered a hypothesis at all.”\textsuperscript{382} As such, he contends that if the pluralistic hypothesis is to
live up to his name, Hick must provide criteria as to how it might be proven wrong.

\textsuperscript{379} Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism, 37.
\textsuperscript{380} Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, xiii.
\textsuperscript{381} Fredericks, Faith among Faiths, 105.
\textsuperscript{382} Fredericks, Faith among Faiths, 106.
With the conflict between the *personae* of theistic tradition (and as D’Costa and Eddy argue, Hick’s Copernican revolution as well) and the *impersonae* of many eastern religions, there is a significant amount of data that stands against a pluralistic hypothesis. Of course, within Hick’s schema these conflicts are rendered ineffectual due to the religious ambiguity of the world. However, if Hick’s position is taken to be a theistic one and that this theological assertion frames his entire Copernican epicycle, how can non-theistic religions be placed under his umbrella? Hick offers a convincing argument as to the transcategorical nature of the Divine and how the distinction between *personae* and *impersonae* is a result of human finitude attempting to comprehend the Real. However, the fact remains that non-theistic traditions have trouble with the metaphysical assumptions that Hick makes vis-à-vis the Real.

Marilyn McCord Adams offers an excellent insight into Hick’s pluralistic program and how it addresses other religious traditions. Furthermore, she attempts to highlight the motivating force behind Hick’s hypothesis: the intolerable treatment of human persons justified by religious or racial superiority. For Adams, the pluralistic hypothesis is intended to alleviate the practical problem with the construction of a framework that overcomes the religious justification of evils. It represents a framework that supports religious tolerance. However, while she underlines the program has a practical motivation, she questions whether Hick is attempting to champion religious pluralism or a potential global theology.

She claims that the philosophical foundation and resulting metaphysical speculation do not so much act to put religions into perspective as members of a global religious community, but rather seek to supplant religions as the chief understanding of the human person’s position in relation to transcendent Reality. The Kantian base supports what she calls a downgrade of each religious tradition’s metaphysical claims so that they are not regarded as absolute claims. While the claims become metaphorical rather than literal, Hick simultaneously rejects the assertion that religions are naturalistic constructions. Rather, he contends that all of them are responses to imperfect experience of a

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383 John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 164–78, offers perhaps the most contemporary version of this argument, but evidence of this position can be found throughout his body of work.

384 Adams, “Which is it? Religious Pluralism or Global Theology,” 34.

transcendental Real and, Adams observes, this is tantamount to a substantive claim that conflicts with his own epistemology. In Adams’ reading, Hick concludes that only his claims are literally true. Again, we return to the image of six blind men and the elephant, with Hick standing alongside and observing everything.

As the metaphysical claims of various religious traditions could be seen as incompatible with Hick’s metaphysical claim, Adams asserts that what Hick is proposing is tantamount to conversion. For Adams, the metaphysical claims are literally true or literally false, not mythologically true. She observes that Hick “doesn’t dignify the competitors by calling them being literally false.” This plays out in Hick’s Christology; he observes a conflict between the unique nature of Christ and his own Copernican position and, as such, places Christ in an inferior position in order to reconcile the conflict. With this perspective one could very easily reach the conclusion that Hick’s pluralistic position represents one step closer to exclusivism, as argued by Copan, or perhaps a form of inclusivism. Hick makes positive, substantive statements that supersede individual religious claims they come into conflict with.

Adams asserts that “Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis wins through to religious tolerance by practicing metaphysical intolerance.” The change of status it invites requires religious traditions to downgrade their metaphysical understandings to being metaphorical in nature. For Adams this represents a kind of guaranteed epistemological humility. All knowledge is contextualised so there is no sufficient proof of a particular perspective. Adams makes a compelling case, and I agree with this statement, but not the conclusion. This thesis not agree with the claim that Hick asserts that only his perspective is literally true.

How then should Hick be understood if he is refuting metaphysical claims within the variety of religious traditions while putting forward his own? Paul Knitter has a simple explanation as to how this perceived hypocrisy is overcome: Hick is not claiming anything. Rather, Knitter highlights that Hick is presenting a hypothesis based on the empirical data that he has collected and is attempting to offer a rational explanation for the diversity of

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religious claims. Hick puts forward a complex and compelling epistemology to account for how the human person processes religious experience and knowledge. Hick then employs this epistemological claim to “lay out sound arguments why the decision to believe that there is a Divine Reality at the source and heart of the universe makes good sense and contributes to a happy, healthy life.” This work is particularly useful for our purposes. Knitter examines the distinction between Reality and experienced reality offering his perspective on the Kantian distinction. Specifically, he examines how it is used in Hick’s schema.

Within the framework of Hick's schema, religious groups adopt two basic assumptions when they enter into conversation: 1) They all belong to and speak from within a religiocultural context; and 2) they all approach dialogue with the concept in mind that “What they have learned from this God will provide the real common ground, the final word, that will bring all religions into a new kind of unity never before experienced or perhaps conceived.” He contends that adopting a perspective that a tradition possesses normative content at the core of its religious understanding is necessary and encouraged to avoid this claim. It is the position of this thesis that this approach not only applies to how religious traditions react to each other within Hick’s framework, but also specifically applies to how religious traditions react to Hick’s own metaphysical claims. As a metaphysical realist, Adams asserts that an adoption of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis relegates a tradition’s own claims to a sort of metaphorical status. However, according to Knitter’s contention this would not cause Hick’s metaphysical claims to be held above those in one’s own tradition. All that is accepted are Hick’s epistemological foundations and they act to limit all metaphysical awareness to one of personal experience, contextualised by one’s own propositional beliefs.

Let us then return to Fredericks. Knitter highlights an understanding of how metaphysical claims of other traditions can be placed within Hick’s framework, including those claims of Hick himself. As such, Hick’s hypothesis can be understood as carrying core

391 Specifically, here within the “mutuality mode” Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 164, uses Hick’s position as an example of this model so we are in safe territory applying this understanding to Hick’s platform.
epistemological claims that are based on empirical evidence and observation to construct
the hypothesis itself. This can be understood as an assumption of universal religious
ambiguity that is experienced as phenomena and is interpreted religiously or
naturalistically.\textsuperscript{392} Then there is a further dimension where Hick interprets observed data
and phenomena and applies his understanding to speculate on a variety of topics. This
thesis contends that it is this basic epistemological understanding that forms the core of the
hypothesis and allows for a secular as well as religious interpretation. The metaphysical
speculation that Hick engages in represents what he sees as a natural end point for his
philosophical exercise. If the hypothesis itself is comprised of epistemological assertions
based on empirical evidence and understanding, then it satisfies Frederick’s criteria for a
hypothesis. As such, Schmidt-Leukel asserts that pluralists have provided a viable alternative
to the exclusivist and inclusivist positions. A claim to exclusivism or inclusivism is always
housed within the confines of a particular tradition while pluralism can transcend religio-
cultural boundaries. “They can agree on their equality in diversity.”\textsuperscript{393}

Schmidt-Leukel sees that pluralists have pointed out the essential flaws and incurable
deficits that hinder the exclusivist and inclusivist theologies. He attempts to highlight that
pluralist theologies achieve their goal of breaking down barriers between religions. He
suggests that “pluralist theologies do not predetermine dialogue but can be understood as
suggesting a hypothesis whose credibility can be enhanced or reduced through dialogue, a
hypothesis which is, on its own premises, a strong encouragement of dialogue as a way of
mutual learning and enrichment.”\textsuperscript{394} As such, taken as a pluralistic, epistemological
understanding the hypothesis achieves its goal of breaking down barriers between the
various religious traditions. However, Sumner Twiss asserts that to view Hick’s philosophical
program as a purely pragmatic exercise does not do it justice.\textsuperscript{395} It contains a significant
body of ontological understanding that builds upon foundational works of epistemology. We

\textsuperscript{392} Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, xvii.
\textsuperscript{393} Perry Schmidt–Leukel, “Religious Pluralism and the need for an Interreligious Theology,” in \textit{Religious
\textsuperscript{394} Schmidt–Leukel, “Religious Pluralism and the Need for an Interreligious Theology,” 21.
\textsuperscript{395} Sumner B. Twiss, “The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics,” \textit{The
cannot overlook Hick’s commitment to ontological realism, the cognitive significance of religious discourse via eschatological verification.”

Twiss highlights the necessity of the Divine Noumenon; it is a postulate that is rationally required if the pluralist hypothesis is to be held. In further support of the hypothetical nature of Hick’s metaphysical claims, Hick asserts that there is only a single Divine Noumenon that acts as the ultimate origin of religious experience and that it cannot be directly experienced sensually (as sense experience is mediated) and only be known indirectly. Twiss highlights Hick’s emphasis on observed, empirical datum to demonstration the soteriological adequacy of the various traditions. While his metaphysical speculation as to the single origin of religious experience and moral teaching may exceed the range of his epistemology, if it is understood hypothetically, it does not come into conflict with his Kantian distinction.

Twiss cites Netland’s objection to Hick’s statement, “If it is shown to be reasonable to accept as veridical religious experience for a particular tradition, then the religious experience of the other traditions must also be accepted as veridical.” It is argued that veridicality of religions must be examined on a case by case basis rather than wholesale acceptance. Twiss argues that this critique fails to recognise that Hick is attempting to make a general statement regarding the acceptance of the truth inherent in other traditions. While Twiss argues that this is on the basis of credulity, Hicks statement should be interpreted as a negative one. Specifically, Hick is asserting that regardless of one’s position, due to the nature of human knowing as being limited, one can never know whether another account carries as much truth as one’s own.

Twiss’ argument is sound. Hick desires to argue for an acceptance of the possibility that truth is as present within one tradition as in any other. Twiss observes that, “in order to do this, he explicitly develops a whole theory of religious pluralism to support the contention.” Credulity plays a major role in Hick’s argument: If within an individual’s own context, it is reasonable to accept religious claims, why would it be unreasonable for an

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individual in another context to accept different ones? Twiss highlights that Hick is attempting to (and his intention is to) provide a well-reasoned argument as to why the pluralist hypothesis is a possible explanation for religious diversity. Hick is not attempting to convert others to a metaphysical framework that subverts their own religious context. “Hick is proposing only the conditional rationality of the pluralist hypothesis that all the major religious traditions are in fact veridical and mediate real contact with a higher reality.”

Gillis provides a similar account of Hick’s hypothesis.

*Hick does not claim to stand in superior judgement over the religious landscape,*

*his criteria (like salvation/liberation) are drawn from the religions themselves.*

*However, his hypothesis does seem to contain a certain claim to neutrality because he has characterised it as a second-order philosophical exercise, a meta-theory which reflects on religious diversity and offers an explanation of the data.*

Let us return to the metaphor of the elephant that is so often employed in any discussion of Hick. In our first chapter we examined that Hick’s perspective offers an understanding of how the human person processes knowledge. Hick is not suggesting that he sees the nature of God or has a greater understanding of the divine than anyone else. Rather, Hick is asserting that he is as blind as everyone else as that blindness is a foundational attribute of being human. He is highlighting the cognitive dissonance between claims of knowing God in an essential way and claiming that God is ineffable. Hick cannot see the elephant (or, realistically, whether there is only one), but he observes that all others who claim to know the elephant suffer from the same limited perception that he does. Rather than claiming to know the metaphysical status of transcendental Reality, instead Hick advocates that dialogue between the blind men will enable them to see that their own perception is as limited as incomplete as his own.

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401 Gillis, A question of final belief, 168
This is in line with Hick’s Kantian underpinning. For Kant empirical evidence cannot move beyond its own context to be employed for speculation on anything outside the boundaries of unassisted reason. “Kant’s disavowal of all claims to transcendent knowledge justifies his refusal to assert that there is no such thing as supernatural revelation. On the other hand, it justifies equally his refusal to admit the possibility that anyone might have adequate grounds for claiming the authenticity of any putative revelation.” ⁴⁰²

The argument does not mean that people cannot be morally judged on matters where one person may possess more morally relevant information than another; it only means that people should not be morally required to hold a belief for which no person could ever, under any circumstances, have adequate grounds. In this it is understood that any human being will find it impossible, in principle, to authenticate any alleged case of supernatural revelation. “If God spoke to a human being, the latter could never know that it was God who spoke to him.” ⁴⁰³

However, this runs counter to the profound humility expressed in Hick’s writing. Hick highlights in Problems of Religious Pluralism that he expects that—not specifically that his pluralist perspective will be proven right but, by virtue of his perspective of religious ambiguity which he appeals to throughout the chapter—“it seems likely that the different expectations cherished within the different traditions will ultimately turn out to be partly correct and partly incorrect.” ⁴⁰⁴ This does not appear comparable to the absolute metaphysical certitude that Hick possesses in Copan’s reading.

Gillis compares Hick’s theological body of work as being more similar to those of Rahner or Augustine—the intent is not to offer a comprehensive system but instead to examine only specific issues. As such “Hick’s writings should not be conceived as independent parts of a larger scheme or theological system.” ⁴⁰⁵ This is valuable to note as it stands to divide Hick’s treatise into both its epistemological roots and his theological conclusions. What this means for us is that his epistemology can stand alone. For Gillis, Hick’s theological conclusions should be dealt with theologically and his philosophical

⁴⁰² Wood, Kant’s Deism, 11.
⁴⁰³ Wood, citing Kant. – Wood, Kant’s Deism, 11.
conclusions should be dealt with philosophically. The Christian theological adequacy of Hick’s epistemological foundation is irrelevant; he is offering an account of experience intended to satisfy both religious and naturalistic audiences rather than offering a comprehensive theological account.

4.6 Concluding Notes

In this chapter, this thesis has addressed critiques of Hick’s philosophical exercise to establish that Hick’s reliance on his epistemological foundation is well-reasoned and valid. The examination of the Christian character that Hick maintains throughout within his pluralistic framework must be noted. Sinkinson is correct in his conclusion that Hick does not explicitly employ a Christian starting point, but it is similarly evident that Hick imagines the Real through a Christian lens. Ultimately, this means that Hick’s Real at the centre of his Copernican epicycle is understood using a Christian understanding of God as the God-of-love. However, such an approach is easily justifiable according to his epistemological claims; a purely philosophical or empirical exercise cannot overcome natural biases and is invariably coloured by context. Hick cannot escape his starting point and his own epistemological foundation accounts for this. The empirical data that contributes to Hick’s philosophical conclusions operates according to the process outlined in his appropriation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s seeing-as.

This is reinforced by Kant’s concept of eternal law as a philosophical exercise within the Kantian framework; there is room within a system based on the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction to postulate the existence of the noumenal Real and it offers a basis for the moral dimension of the life of the human person. Hick is well within the bounds of his epistemology to highlight that the Real likely possesses characteristics that are evidenced in the major religious traditions. Like Hick’s soteriological exercises, this claim stems primarily from an empirical observation coloured by his own context. What is problematic, however, is that the pluralistic framework ceases to be relevant for those traditions that fall outside this understanding of the Real.

Copan’s position that the universe is more readily and convincingly explained by a personal Being proves to be an interesting discussion. If Copan’s account is perceived to be more convincing, it meets Hick’s challenge of constructing an explanation for the universe of faiths that exceeds his own pluralistic hypothesis. However, Copan’s position does not offer sufficient evidence that appears more convincingly true. Rather, Copan offers a more complete account of the creation of the universe, not one that is more convincing. It seems apparent that Copan is arguing from a position that an explanation of the motive force behind the creation of the universe is more convincing than no explanation. However, it is difficult to accept that one, unverified claim is more convincing than the admission that humans are not aware of the processes behind the creation of the universe. It is simply beyond the capacity of our current models of physics to describe. This problem, however, ceases to be a pressing one when Hick’s hypothesis is understood as a hypothetical exercise.

This chapter has highlighted that Hick’s hypothesis must be accepted as a hypothetical exercise. Although his epistemology represents a factual claim as to the processes that humans go through when experiencing, the resulting theological conclusions must be taken as hypothetical. Hick’s philosophical exercise attempts to highlight an alternative to an exclusivist or even inclusivist understanding rather than attempting to construct a competing global theology. Within Hick’s epistemology, as he is aware, the human person cannot move beyond sensibility to make assertions about the noumenal world. Observations, however, can be made of the finite world and hypothesis constructed of the character of the object of phenomenal experience. As such, this thesis finds Hick’s application of his epistemology in constructing his pluralistic hypothesis both well-reasoned and valid.
Chapter 5

Conclusion of the Thesis

The core aim of this thesis has been to grapple with Hick’s epistemological foundation. It has answered the question: Does Hick’s epistemology form a solid foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis? It has achieved this by grappling with various elements of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and the criticism that it engenders. We find ultimately that Hick’s hypothesis is utterly reliant on his epistemological foundation to establish that the various religious traditions stem from a common core. What we find is that Hick’s ultimate claim struggles to convince those who challenge his foundation and its application.

Let us then return to our three arising questions:

1) What are John Hick’s epistemological assumptions that he employs as a foundation for his philosophical exercise? We have established clearly that Hicks epistemological assumptions are founded on his understanding of religion and within a philosophical distinction between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal expressions that are encountered within the various religious traditions. However, Hick’s epistemological claim becomes a double-edged sword; while it convinces readily those who would accept the Kantian distinction and the parity between religious experience and sensory experience, it struggles to overcome the bounds of Hick’s theory of knowledge. As described in our first chapter, Kant becomes irretrievable from Hick’s conception of the constitutive elements that make up religious tradition. This offers a comprehensive account of how religious experience can be understood in light of religious pluralism, and how propositional claims arise. Hick’s epistemology moves beyond the bounds of those that inspire it and highlights the human dimension of religious claims, in line with his understanding of religious pluralism that he developed from W. C. Smith. We establish that this offers an excellent starting point for Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and demonstrates clearly that religious claims can be understood as bearing a limited truth.
2) How do they function as a foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis? However, we also establish that Hick’s Kantian core acts to hinder any kind of positive claim. Hick’s soteriological position becomes a tenuous one; what criteria can one employ to judge whether salvation/liberation is taking place within a religious tradition when the criteria themselves are suspect? Hick accounts for this by employing a movement towards Reality-centeredness as his main criterion. But how does one judge that this is a movement towards Reality when Reality itself is obfuscated and beyond human concepts? It becomes problematic when Hick’s soteriological conclusion is taken as a propositional claim as a part of his pluralistic hypothesis. The ineffable Real that stands at the centre of his Copernican revolution is transcategorical and beyond human conception. As such, it runs into significant problems when attempting to ascribe meaning to religious traditions in light of his hypothesis. Hick’s account becomes problematic as it deprives cumulative tradition of the transcendental authority that many feel are foundational to meaning. Although Hick attempts to circumvent this issue via his claim regarding the cognitive nature of religious language and experience, a change in the status of a claim within a religion acts to alter the meaning of the claim. In line with Hick’s epistemological foundation, however, Hick cannot convincingly argue a propositional truth claim regardless of reasoning.

3) Is Hick’s interpretation and application of Kant’s epistemology well-reasoned and valid? Ultimately, this thesis argues that Hick’s metaphysical claims should be viewed as separate from his epistemological claims. While his epistemological claims are derived from empirical evidence, observation, and reasoning, his theological conclusions instead result from speculation based on how his epistemology would interact with religious perspectives. When these conclusions are taken to be hypothetical exercises to establish how Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis would be applicable, the problem of his metaphysical claims becomes irrelevant. Hick’s hypothesis should be viewed in the way that he highlights that it should be viewed, as a hypothesis, and not as a comprehensive framework in competition with other religious perspectives. This thesis contends that—as a hypothesis that offers a philosophical account of many different religious traditions encountering the same Real while experiencing it phenomenally in different ways—taken as it is intended Hick’s end point is well reasoned and valid. Kant’s epistemology offers compelling evidence for Hick’s perspective and an excellent defence against critique. However, it must be reiterated that
Hick’s entire philosophical exercise presupposes that his epistemological core is sound and accepted, and it remains unconvincing to those who would disagree with its foundational claims.

**Does Hick’s Epistemology Form a Solid Foundation for his Pluralistic Hypothesis?**

In response to the thesis, this author must conclude that, yes, Hick’s epistemology provides a provisionally solid foundation for his pluralistic hypothesis. Hick’s epistemology, provided it is accepted, acts as an interpretive framework that underpins his theological and philosophical conclusions. It can be employed as a convincing defence against critique, as well, as we have evidenced within the previous chapter. Ultimately, however, Hick’s philosophical exercise is reliant on his epistemological claims in the extreme. A rejection of Hick’s starting point acts to render his entire hypothesis suspect.
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