Hick’s “Copernican Revolution” and Its Theological Implications

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ABSTRACT—This study focuses primarily on Hick’s “Copernican revolution,” a theocentric model of world religions, and its implications for Christian theology. By “Copernican revolution,” Hick tries to answer the problem of the plurality of religions and the conflicting views among world religions. According to his Copernican revolution, God (or the Real) is taking the place of church or Christ in Christianity as the central doctrine upon which all others are built. This thought in turn leads to the notion that all religions are in contact with the same Real and are equally valid ways of salvation. Even though Hick kept changing and developing his idea of the Copernican revolution (theocentrism), he never changed his basic framework of the centrality of God or the Real in looking at world religions. For instance, at first he uses the term “God” for the Ultimate Reality, but later he prefers the term “the Real” in order not to be biased toward any religion. Hick’s Copernican revolution has left several critical implications: 1) The inaccessibility of the Real is never overcome by his Kantian revolution; 2) His system excludes the possibility of the self-utterance of the Real; 3) His theocentrism inevitably denies the doctrine of incarnation; 4) Hick’s Copernican revolution eventually implies the uselessness of Christian mission.

Keywords: John Hick, religious pluralism, the Real, theocentrism, Copernican revolution, Kantian revolution, mission
I. Introduction

Religious pluralism is one of the major challenges for church mission that Christianity encounters in the beginning of the 21st century. According to John Hick, a prolific writer in religious pluralism and Emeritus Professor of Claremont Graduate University, California, who has offered “one of the most sophisticated and influential pluralistic philosophies of world religions” (Eddy, 1994, p. 467), religious pluralism is “the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions. There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation” (Hick, 1985, p. 34). To Hick, because each of the great world religions is a response to the divine Real, “each is a context of human salvation” (Hick, 1995, p. 136). Hick argues for the notion of universal salvation that all will be saved eventually. This idea of universal salvation seems attractive to the postmodern minds that are willing to be open to all ideas and possibilities. In fact, Hick’s theocentric religious pluralism which offers salvific transformation for all religious adherents seems to be the solution for the apparent problem of plurality of religions.

This, however, does not mean that religious pluralism is the right answer to the problem of the religious diversity today. Thus, in order to understand and evaluate Hick’s religious pluralism one must start with his theory of “Copernican revolution” which “allows all religious systems of thought to be equally valid ways of salvation” (Eitel, 1990, p. 282). His reasoning behind this is that world religions are “different human responses to the one divine Reality embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances” (Hick, 1982, p. 12). In other words, what the religions of the world perceive in regard to the Real are different only phenomenologically, but they are their different yet authentic responses to the noumenal Real, which is beyond human cognition. All human perceptions of the Real are in a sense approximations of the Real as it is in itself.

II. Hick’s Copernican (or Kantian) Revolution

The theological foundation of Hick’s religious pluralism is based upon his theocentric model of world religions. This theocentrism is
Hick’s answer to the problem of plurality of religions and their conflicting truth-claims and salvation claims. It is clearly seen in his self-described “Copernican revolution.” Hick adopted the term “Copernican revolution” from astronomy, in which it “involved a shift from the dogma that the earth is the centre of the revolving universe to the realization that it is the sun that is at the centre, with all the planets, including our own earth, moving around it” (Hick, 1973, p. 131). Thus, the essence of Hick’s Copernican revolution in Christian theology “must involve an equally radical transformation of our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our own religion within it” (Hick, 1982, p. 36), and must involve “a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is God who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him” (Hick, 1973, p. 131). As a result, the concept of God takes the place of church or Christ in Christianity as the central doctrine upon which all other doctrines are built. This involves “a parallel abandonment of the Christianity-centred assumption through recognition that Christianity is one of several religious traditions” (Grant, 1989, p. 57). As D’Costa says, “the Copernican revolution marked a shift from ecclesiocentrism and Christocentrism to one of theocentrism” (D’Costa, 1991, p. 4).

Hick, over time, has developed his theory of world religions in two stages, yet as will be seen later the essence (i.e. centrisim) of his theory has never changed. First, in the pre-1989 period, Hick’s theory is built upon theocentrism, which can be defined as a Copernican revolution. Second, in the post-1989 period, Hick’s theory is built upon realocentrism, which can be defined as a Kantian revolution.

A. Hick’s Early Theocentric Model of Religions (pre-1989)

The theocentric model of world religions is Hick’s early pre-Kantian way of solving the inevitable problem and dilemma that he faced in truth and salvation claims among different religions (Basinger, 2000, p. 162). From the Christian perspective, the biggest obstacle that Hick encountered in his move toward a pluralistic hypothesis was “a central Christian position that salvation is through Christ alone” (Hick, 1973, p. 121), that is, “outside the church, or outside Christianity, there is no salvation” (ibid). Hick’s proposal of theocentrism was his reconciling answer to the exclusive attitude of Christianity toward other religions, and at the same time was a sign of
the denial of the fundamental Christian doctrine of incarnation. Hick’s theological argument that the concept of God or the divine is a common denominator of world religions is foundational to his religious pluralism.

There are two factors that led Hick to the theocentric view of world religions: (1) the theological and moral argument—the concept of God’s “universal love” (ibid., 122); (2) the phenomenological argument—the cultural relativity of religions (see Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 1989, p. 2). The first factor that led Hick to his theocentric model of world religions is his idea of God who is “the God of universal love” (Hick, 1982, p. 122). Hick’s idea of God, who is personal and loving, must have been borrowed from the Christian concept of a God whose dominant attribute is love. The concept of God’s universal love, Hick argues, is not compatible with a real world where there are numerous people, maybe the majority of human beings, who are “outside the historical influence of Jesus of Nazareth” (Hick, 1971, p. 119) and are damned or lost. He adds, “Thus the doctrine that there is no salvation outside historic Christianity would in effect deny the universal love and redeeming activity of God” (ibid). This concept of God’s universal love was, for Hick, a dominant attribute of God, which led him initially toward pluralistic thinking. As expressed in his book Evil and God of Love (1966), God’s universal love was presupposed in Hick’s theological framework. Hick argues, if “God is the God of universal love” who wants to save all, he must save at least the large majority of the human race if not all rather than “only a small minority” as Christians claim (Hick, 1973, p. 122). It is this moral contradiction, in part, that led Hick to theocentrism.

The second factor that led Hick to theocentrism was phenomenological in nature: the cultural relativity of religions. This view, as Eddy observed, is founded in the phenomenon that “one’s membership within one of the world’s religions is generally a factor of parentage and birth place” (ibid., 152). For instance, Hick argues, “when someone, anyone, is born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan or Indonesia, that person is very likely to become a Muslim; when to Buddhist parents in Tibet or Sri Lanka or Japan, to become a Buddhist; when to Hindu parents in India, to become a Hindu; when to Christian parents in Mexico or Poland or Italy to become a Catholic Christian; and so on” (Hick, 1995, p. 8). The idea that religion is an accident of birth led Hick to theocentrism, because it poses a problem in the traditional Christian exclusivism that there is
no salvation outside the church or Christianity. In other words, if one’s religion is based on one’s ethnic, cultural, or geographic background, it is not fair to say that anybody’s religion is better than somebody else’s because they are all relative. The only fair answer is, Hick would argue, that everybody has slightly different views of the same God from his or her different backgrounds.

**B. Hick’s Later Shift to a Kantian Model of Religions (post-1989)**

Under the influence of Kantian philosophy, Hick proposed his “own contribution . . . to the epistemology of religion” (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 261), which became the main solution to the conflicting truth-claims particularly in regard to the different views of the Ultimate Reality. With an appeal to Kant’s distinction between “phenomena” and “noumena” (Kant, 1959, p. 186), Hick, applying this insight to the awareness of the Real, distinguishes “between the noumenal Real, the Real an sich, and the Real as humanly perceived in different ways as range of divine phenomena” (Hick, 1995, p. 29). Thus, as Eddy rightly observes, “Hick began to experiment with a variety of terms” (Eddy, 1999, p. 173) for “God” such as “the Eternal One” (Hick, 1982, pp. 41-59), the Divine, the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Ultimate Real, and the Real, in search of a more religiously neutral term, before he settled on “the more tradition-neutral term, ‘the Real’” (Hick, 1991, p. 189; see Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 10).

This whole process of changing terminologies for this Ultimate Reality occurred over a period of time (Hick, 1995, p. 65), from the ’70s to the late ’80s and onward, and particularly in his *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989). This, however, does not mean that Hick has changed his idea concerning “an ultimate Reality,” but rather shows his change in terminology to have “the more tradition-neutral term ‘the Real’” (Hick, 1991, p. 189), which may include theistic and nontheistic, personal and impersonal Ultimate Reality. Thus, Hick’s use of the pre-Kantian term God up to the ’80s is replaced by his new Kantian terminology “the Real.” In so doing, Hick seems not to have relinquished the basic theistic structure of the Ultimate Reality, but he wants to remove the theistic color in his use of it, broadening his previous views on that Reality (Hick, 2008, p. 4).
III. Theology of the Real

As noted above, Hick’s model of world religions is centered upon the concept of the Real or the divine Being. Whatever it is called, this divine Reality is the central focus of Hick’s theology of world religions. Though taking a lot of time to explore the meaning of this Reality, Hick has difficulties doing so due to its inaccessibility. If this Ultimate Reality is a key to the understanding of Hick’s model of world religions, it is necessary to clarify first of all what Hick means by the Real. Then I will discuss other related issues such as the distinction between *noumenal* and *phenomenal*, the possibility of the knowledge of God, and finally, the linkage between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal Real.

A. The Concept of the Real

The concept of the Real which is at the center of the universe of faiths in Hick’s religious pluralism is a very difficult concept to grasp. Hick’s central figure in the universe of faiths was acquired from conceptions related to the Christian Deity whose generic name is known as God to English-speaking people. As a matter of fact, up to the point when Hick proposed the Copernican revolution in the early 1980s he exclusively limited his use of the title God to describe the Being. For instance, in his book *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973), as the title suggests, Hick used the title God throughout the book. Hick’s use of the title God is natural because he, though proposing the pluralistic theology of religion, still did so from a Christian perspective.

Struggling to find the best title for that reality, Hick showed a wide range of the use of titles in his writings throughout time as he was developing his theory. He said, “We therefore have such options as the Transcendent, the Ultimate, Ultimate Reality, the Supreme Principle, the Divine, the One, the Eternal, the Eternal One, the Real” (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 10). The reason why he was struggling to find the right word is that once he chose one title, the concept of the reality would be limited and confined in the terminology itself, which hardly contains that Reality. As can be observed in his writings, Hick did not want to limit himself to any one tradition by choosing the title of the Reality in favor of it. He must choose a title as neutral as possible that can satisfy all major world religions. In his struggle to find the most appropriate word, he chose
some titles such as “the Transcendent, the Divine, and the Eternal One,” among which he thinks the latter two would be “too theistically coloured” (ibid.). Finally, he was between two choices—“the Transcendent” and “the Real”—and chose the latter. This does not mean that Hick exclusively uses this term (the Real) to describe Ultimate Reality. Hick lists his reasons why he chose this title instead of others to describe Ultimate Reality as follows:

This term has the advantage that without being the exclusive property of any one tradition it is nevertheless familiar within all of them. In Christian terms it gives rise to no difficulty to identify God, the sole self-existent reality, as the Real. Within Islam the Real, *al Haqq*, is one of the names of Allah. Within the Hindu family of faiths it is natural to think of the ultimate reality, Brahman, as *sat* or *satya*, the Real. Within Mahayana Buddhism the Dharmakaya or *sunyata* is also spoken of as *tattva*, the Real. In Chinese religious thought the ultimate is *zhēn*, the Real. ‘The Real’ is then, I suggest, as good a generic name as we have for that which is affirmed in the varying forms of transcendent religious belief. For it is used within the major theistic and non-theistic traditions and yet is neutral as between their very different ways of conceiving, experiencing and responding to that which they affirm in these diverse ways (ibid.).

Though Hick proposes using the words “the Real” to describe Ultimate Reality, he does not use this term because he considers it adequate. According to him, “there is no adequate term” to describe Ultimate Reality. However, probably coming from a Christian background, Hick argues, “it is customary in Christian language to think of God as that which is alone finally real” (Hick, 1995, p. 18), and this term does not offend other religious traditions.

Thus, I now have reached Hick’s favorite term “the Real,” which is central to Hick’s universe of faiths yet cannot be defined because the Real is beyond human cognitive ability. Hick’s description of the Real is still confusing. As mentioned above, following Kantian insight Hick made a distinction between the Real as it is in itself and the Real as it is experienced in different religions. In his own words,

This distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our human religious concepts entails that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the
characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 350).

If nothing can be described about the Real itself, how can we know anything about it? Hick, however, does say something about the Real. He says, “All that we can say is that we postulate the Real *an sich* as the ultimate ground of the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience” (ibid.). Hick appeals to a “necessary postulate” (ibid., 249) argument, which is based on his epistemological rule that “the phenomenal world is that same noumenal world as it appears to our human consciousness” (ibid., 241). Though we have no direct access, Hick argues, we must postulate “such an unknown and unknowable *Ding an sich*,” because without it “we should be left with a plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* each of which is claimed to be the Ultimate, but no one of which alone can be” (ibid., 249). Thus, Hick’s conception of the noumenal Real is the product of his postulate, based upon various phenomenal religious experiences. Hick’s conception of the Real is not a direct knowledge of the Real itself, but a mere conjecture that is based on various religious experiences. We still have a question unanswered: Is real knowledge of the Real possible? Before inquiring about this question below, I will discuss Hick’s distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, the epistemological insights he adopted from Kant to deal with the dilemma of knowing the Real that is beyond our cognitive ability.

**B. The Distinction between *Noumenon* and *Phenomenon***

As John C. Lyden observes, “Hick is not suggesting that all religions say the ‘same thing,’ or that there are no real differences among their concepts of the Real and the salvation it offers” (Lyden, 1994, p. 61). Rather, what he is proposing is that every religion perceives the Real differently in their own cultural, historical, and geographical backgrounds. Thus, “at the center of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis” (Seeman, 2003, p. 162) is the distinction between
noumenon and phenomenon, with which Hick tries to make ineffable noumenal Real available to human conceptuality phenomenologically. This distinction between noumenon and phenomenon is originally acquired from Kant’s epistemological model in order to solve the apparent problem of contradictory notions of the Real. Unlike the realist who claims that knowledge is knowledge of the things, and the idealist who says that knowledge is knowledge of my own idea, Kant claims that “knowledge is transcendental” (Marias, 1967, p. 286). It only knows the phenomenon (thing in me), not the noumenon (thing-in-itself). The noumenon (the thing-in-itself) is inaccessible, because it is not in me, “affected by my subjectivity” (ibid.). However, it must be noted that though Hick adopts basic Kantian “epistemological insights, namely that the mind actively interprets sensory information in terms of concepts,” “everything I know is made up of two elements: that which is given and that which I posit” (Marias, 1967, p. 289), he is not strictly Kantian because he extends the noumenal-phenomenal insight beyond sense experience to religious experience (Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 1989, p. 244). Hick’s adoption of the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon not only made his pluralistic hypothesis work in the face of the dilemma of problems of conflicting conceptions, but also became his major tool for his perennial support for the pluralistic hypothesis.

This dichotomy between noumenon and phenomenon plays a major role in Hick’s thought. By taking this basic insight of Kant’s epistemology and applying it to our religious experience as Kant never did, Hick arrived at his own “Kantian revolution” (D’Costa, 1991, p. 4) as D’Costa calls it—“a synthesis that forms the foundation for his response to the problem of conflicting conceptions” (Eddy, 1994, p. 468). Thus, according to Hick’s system, as Eddy notes, “conflicting images of the divine are not merely understandable, but are even to be expected” (ibid.). This line of argument could solve the central problem of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, namely the problem of conflicting views of the Real. In other words, by applying his own “Kantian revolution” (dichotomy between noumenon and phenomenon) Hick is able to catch two rabbits at a time: he can affirm the existence of the single noumenal Real while maintaining the radically different conceptions of it in various world religions.

Responding to what Alston calls the “level distinction” between “the one ultimate reality” and its “pictures,” “images,” or “representations” (Alston, 2000, p. 194)—between the ultimate divine Reality and the different human conceptions and perceptions
of that Reality—Hick presents his pluralistic hypothesis through the Kantian system of thought as follows:

Instead of giving rival accounts of a common intended referent, the religious belief-systems each give an account of a different referent, namely their own culturally influenced communal perception of the ultimately Real. On this view, we postulate the transcendent divine Reality which lies (as each of the great traditions at some point asserts) beyond our networks of human concepts; which is the ground of all existence and the source of all salvific power; which is conceptualized in a variety of ways in terms of the two basic religious categories of personal deity and non-personal absolute, and under each category in a variety of concrete forms as Adonai, the heavenly Father, Allah, Vishnu, etc., and as Brahman, the Dharmakaya, the Tao, etc. (Hick, 1993, p. 248).

In this manner the Real is conceived differently in each tradition “through the complex lens of a human tradition, consisting of modes of thought, spiritual practices, sacred writings, theological and philosophical systems, great exemplars, and a web of historical contingencies of various kinds” (ibid.). Thus the conception of the Real in each religion can be different, because “every human concept of God . . . is a finite image, or mental picture, of the infinite divine reality that exceeds all human thought” (Hick, 1973, p. 178).

Though what produced Hick’s system to deal with plurality of religious phenomena is Kant’s epistemological insight, which is mainly for the realm of sensory epistemology, Hick made a shift in that he applied the Kantian insight to “the realm of religious epistemology,” as Eddy noted (Eddy, 1999, p. 180). Another divergence from Kant, Eddy insists, “involves the nature of Hick’s category-analogues” (ibid., 181). Whereas Kantian forms and categories are \textit{a priori}, universal, necessary, and invariable, Hick’s “categories of religious experience are not universal and invariable but are on the contrary culture-relative” (Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion}, 1989, pp. 243-244; Kant, 1959, pp. 26-27). Being aware of the problems associated with Kantian epistemological interpretation, Hick does not want to enter into a Kantian dilemma of potential solipsism in the realm of religious matter (Bellotti, 2008). Like Kant who used the term “noumenon” in the negative sense—“we understand a thing so far as it is \textit{not an object of our sensuous}
intuition, thus making abstraction of our mode of intuiting it” (Kant, 1959, p. 186)—Hick uses it in a negative way, as Eddy noted. Eddy writes, “he does not mean to make any positive claims regarding the unknowable divine noumenon. . . . Rather, he wants to refer to it only as a necessary postulate” (Eddy, 1999, p. 178). None of the concrete descriptions about the Real in itself is proposed or affirmed by Hick because it is not within the realm of our conceptual frameworks. As D’Costa observes, “Hick is led into agnosticism” (D’Costa, 1991, p. 6) by his dichotomy between noumenon and phenomenon that he originally adopted to deal with the conflicting truth-claims of world religions. Hick insists, “It cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive” (Hick, 1989, p. 246). Nevertheless, Hick affirms that “the phenomenal world is that same noumenal world as it appears to our human consciousness” (ibid., 241) while the unknowable noumenon exists regardless of our perceptions of it. Thus, though Hick admits that there is no access to the noumenal world, and claims that human religious experience is “not purely imaginary projection” (Hick, 2008, p. 11), he must posit “an element of human projection” (Clarke & Byrne, 1993, p. 87), as Clarke and Byrne observe. Hick does not want to fall into the trap of either agnosticism that we know nothing about the noumenal world, or the conclusion that religions are the product of human delusion or imagination.

C. The Possibility of Knowledge of the Real

As John K. Roth notes, “Central to Hick’s analysis is the idea that no religious tradition describes ‘the Ultimate as it is in itself’” (Roth, 1989, p. 160). As noted above, the basic thesis of Hick in regard to the Real is that the Real is ineffable (Clarke & Byrne, 1993, p. 94) because it is “lying beyond the range of our human conceptual systems” (Hick, 1995, 57). As observed by Kenneth T. Rose, this ineffability of the Real is “the central flaw of the hypothesis” (Rose, 1992, p. 12). Rose summed the essential problem succinctly as follows: “The central flaw of the hypothesis—the claim that the noumenal Real utterly transcends all human experience and knowledge—can never be overcome by any conceptual machinery. . . . If the Real an sich is, as Hick contends, beyond speech, knowledge, and experience, then one has no choice but to remain silent about it” (ibid.). If Hick is consistent in his system, he must admit that his attempt to explore the Real is useless because the
Ultimate or Real is “utterly beyond our comprehension” (Hick, 1995, p. 58). Thus, according to Hick’s system, the Real remains utterly incomprehensible, as he responded to Joseph Prabhu: “Strictly speaking we do not know anything (in the strong sense of ‘know’) about the Real” (Hick, “The Real and Its Personae and Impersonae,” in Concepts of the Ultimate, ed. Linda J. Tessier, 1989, p. 172). Stephen T. Davis’s suggestion is well taken: “All the religions are mistaken in what they say about the Ultimate. Hick simply rejects the way most religions understand themselves (to the extent that they make truth-claims about the Ultimate)” (Davis, 1989, p. 164).

However, Hick does not stop there with the ineffability of the Real itself by emphasizing “the utter transcendence of the Divine nature to any human thought” (Ward, 1993, p. 210) and developing his own epistemological principle based on Kantian epistemological insights. He lists several great church fathers to show “a strong tradition in Christianity of the ineffability of God” (ibid.). Thus, Ward claims that “Hick’s use of the noumenal/phenomenal distinction simply restates the classical Christian doctrine of the Divine ineffability” (ibid.). Adopting Kant’s distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, Hick made a distinction between the Real an sich and the Real as phenomenally expressed in the different cultures and religions, which is the most basic thesis of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis.

The knowledge that is available to human beings is not the firsthand knowledge of the Real as it is in itself, but the secondhand one, if it is anything about the Real at all. Some questions are raised regarding the knowledge of the Real as it is in itself: If the Real as it is itself is known through the Real as thought and experienced, that is, only phenomenally, what is the kind of knowledge of the Real as thought and experienced? How do we know that it is any knowledge of the Real itself?

Hick is positive on the question of the possibility of the knowledge of the Real. Hick argues that the only condition is that “we always perceive the transcendent through the lens of a particular religious culture” (Hick, 1989, p. 8). This means people have the knowledge of the Real within their own religion. However, Hick’s claims, that the infinite Real which is beyond human cognitive ability is known through human thought and experience, are contrary to his fundamental thesis that the Real is utterly ineffable. Based on the distinction between “the Real in itself and the Real as humanly thought and experienced,” Hick proposes “the hypothesis that the infinite Real, in itself beyond the scope of other than purely formal
concepts, is differently conceived, experienced and responded to from within the different cultural ways of being human” (ibid., 14). Thus, as S. Mark Heim notes, “Hick’s hypothesis implies there are some conditions in which it would be verified by an experience of the noumenal Real, i.e. experience of what cannot be experienced” (Heim, 1992, p. 213).

According to Hick’s arguments, though the knowledge of the Real in itself, the noumenal Real, is not within the range of human consciousness, which exists independently of our perception of it, the knowledge of the Real as perceived, the phenomenal Real, is the same Real as it appears to us. Thus, Hick insists that the Real as it appears is “entirely real” (Hick, 1989, p. 242). This leads Hick to affirm that “the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities . . . and . . . by different religious traditions” (ibid.). The distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal produces Hick’s conviction that the noumenal Real can be known through the phenomenal Real, because while the former remains beyond our human conceptuality, the latter reveals phenomenal representations of the former. The great religious traditions are “different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine Reality, and correspondingly different ways of responding to that Reality” (Hick, 1984, p. 229). Even though the religions are responses to the same divine Reality, their conceptions of that same Reality are different to Hick. Understanding this “mixture of commonality and difference,” Hick adds, “in Christian terms it is the distinction between God in himself, in his eternal self-existent being, independently of creation, and God-for-us or God as revealed to us. In more universal language it is the distinction between the Real an sich and the Real as humanly experienced and thought” (ibid.). This brings us to the basic dilemma of Hick’s pluralistic philosophy of religion, the cogntivity of the Real an sich. Unwilling to deny the cogntivity of religious language, Hick argues, “the core religious statements are true or false in a sense that is ultimately factual” (Hick, 1973, p. xvii).

D. The Linkage between the Noumenal Real and the Phenomenal Real

Though it is beyond the limit of human conceptuality, Hick wants to make certain formal statements about the noumenal Real without giving any concrete characteristics. For example, Hick, without
giving any positive statement, offers “Anselm’s definition of God as that than which no greater can be conceived” (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 246). If Hick cannot make any affirmative statement about the Real *an sich*, Hick’s religious pluralism which is based upon his dichotomy between noumenon and phenomenon will not work. Thus, adopting Anselm’s definition of God, by “the Ultimate” or “the Real” Hick proposes to mean that “putative reality which transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself” (Hick, “The Real and Its Personae and Impersonae,” in *Concepts of the Ultimate*, ed. Linda J. Tessier, 1989, p. 143). The Real *an sich* in Hick’s thought is not the reality that human beings can directly experience, but some kind of putative reality that Hick proposed as “a necessary postulate of the pluralistic religious life of humanity” (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 249). Regarding this necessary postulate, Hick says;

For within each tradition we regard real the object of our worship or contemplation. If, as I have already argued, it is also proper to regard as real the objects of worship or contemplation within the other traditions, we are led to postulate the Real *an sich* as the presupposition of the veridical character of this range of forms of religious experience. Without this postulate we should be left with a plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* each of which is claimed to be the Ultimate, but no one of which alone can be (ibid.).

This postulated noumenal Real, Hick insists, is the basis of “the encountered gods and experienced absolutes witnessed to by the religious traditions” (ibid., 246). Hick’s arguments regarding the dichotomy between the postulated noumenal Real and “the encountered gods and experienced absolutes” still do not give a clear answer to the question whether they have a direct connection between them. Unless the linkage between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal Real in Hick’s argument is seen, he could not make certain statements about the Real *an sich* because of its inaccessibility. It is hard to find the necessary linkage between this postulated noumenal Real and the conceptions of the Real in each world religion because we have no direct access to the noumenal Real in Hick’s system. Without any knowledge of the Real *an sich*, there is no way for us to see the connection between them.
Even if there is a connection between them, it is hard to understand why Hick’s range of phenomenological manifestations, that is, the multiple phenomenal appearances, is so wide that we can hardly accept that they are manifestations of the same Real: They are not only different but some of them are contradictory to each other. Is there any relationship between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal Real at all? If there is any, what kind of relationship is there between them? Hick’s answer is that there is no direct or literal relationship between them. As noted above, though Hick’s “noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness” (ibid., 241), the relationship between them is not clearly defined.

However, he insists, “this relationship between the ultimate noumenon and its multiple phenomenal appearances, or between the limitless transcendent reality and our many partial human images of it, makes possible *mythological speech* about the Real [emphasis added]” (ibid., 247-248). The best he could say about the relationship between them is that it is mythological rather than literal. This means the multiple phenomenal appearances are not literally true manifestations of the ultimate noumenon, but rather they are mythological truth which “tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject matter” (ibid., 248). Therefore, Hick claims, “*Analogously*, I want to say that the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions [emphasis added]” (ibid., 242). One thing is certain from his descriptions of the noumenal Real: They are not literal. Though Hick tries to avoid the problem of internal coherence between his claims about the Real as unknowable and several conceptions of it by using such words as “mythological speech,” “analogously,” and “phenomena” and so on, he has to make some positive statements about the Real which are literal, as he does in order to make his system of thought work. For instance, Hick says, the noumenal Real that is experienced and thought by different human minds and its manifestations “are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, *real as authentic manifestations* of the Real [emphasis added]” (ibid.).

**IV. Critical Evaluation of Hick’s Theocentrism (or Realocentrism)**
Hick’s Copernican revolution means that all religions have access and are in contact with the Real, but that the differences between religions are the result of their historical, cultural, and geographical differences. The theocentric model of religion is the fundamental basis for Hick’s religious pluralism, which has some direct implications. First, it has crucial implications for Christology, because Hick’s theocentrism inevitably clashes with the foundational doctrine of Christianity, the doctrine of incarnation. Second, Hick’s notion of the Real is similar to the God of the Bible, who is a personal divine being rather than an impersonal power or some kind of influence. No matter what terminology Hick uses for the Ultimate Reality, he must admit that he believes in a personal divine being. Third, there are apparently conflicting truth-claims of different religious traditions in his pluralistic hypothesis. Fourth, if Hick’s Real, as a necessary postulate, is beyond our understanding, nothing can be said about it. Finally, there is no evidence of the connection between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal Real.

A. The Abandonment of the Doctrine of Incarnation

When Hick applied his Kantian distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* to the doctrine of God, as McCready observes, “he could relativize the person and work of Christ as he sought for a way to reject the salvific claims of Christianity without giving up his claim to be a Christian” (McCready, 1996, p. 258). The paradigm shift from a Christ-centered model to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths, as Hick argues, must involve “a reopening of the Christological question” (Hick, 1982, p. 19). Hick insists, if Jesus was not literally God incarnate as the paradigm shift implies, “the idea of divine incarnation is to be understood metaphorically rather than literally, as an essentially poetic expression of the Christian’s devotion to his Lord” (ibid.). In other words, as Paul Knitter observes, Hick’s main thrust to “a theocentric, non-normative Christology is his insistence that Christian belief in the incarnation and in the divinity of Jesus is mythic and therefore not only allows but demands reinterpretation” (Knitter, 1983, p. 132). If this doctrine of incarnation is to be treated as a myth rather than a literal truth, Jesus is not literally God the Son and the Second Person of the Trinity. This means that Christianity is without its foundation, the person Jesus Christ, on whom the entire Christianity is founded. This approach has further implications on the view of Scripture, whether it is God’s
special revelation for human beings, and on Christian soteriology, that salvation is through Christ alone.

**B. The Real as a Disguised Name for God**

Though Hick does not want to be biased by any religious tradition, including Christianity, Hick’s pre-Kantian theocentric model of world religions was formulated from the Christian idea of a God whose primary attribute is *agape* love. Hick’s pre-Kantian God as a personal loving creator is “formed and informed by Christian scripture and tradition,” says Chester Gillis, because “other traditions (for example, Buddhism, Hinduism) do not conceive of the divine (the Real) as a loving creator” (Gillis, 1989, p. 170). Hick’s Kantian concept of God as the Real that is universal in every religion, as Hick assumes, is the basis of Hick’s religious pluralism. This means that Hick’s system of thought must presuppose the existence of the divine reality who is perceived differently in various cultures, times, and geographical places. Therefore, Hick is sure of the presence of the personal divine Reality, regardless of the fact that the Real is beyond human cognitive abilities.

Affirming the divine Reality, Hick argues, “the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine *persona* and metaphysical *impersona*, as I shall call them, are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real” (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989, p. 242). The title ‘the Real’ that Hick chose for the Ultimate Reality is nothing more than a personal divine being, and thus is a disguised name for the Christian God. In this sense Hick is a critical realist who assumes the actual existence of the divine Reality in his interpretation of religion, no matter how he tries to describe that Reality either as personal being or impersonal reality.

**C. Contradictions in Truth-claims**

According to Hick, one of the major difficulties that religious pluralism faces in relationship to world religions and their theologies is the problem of truth-claims. That Hick recognizes “the ‘conflicting truth-claims’ of the different religious traditions” (ibid.) is obvious in his pluralistic hypothesis. Within all religious traditions, there are
unique theologies that deal with some fundamental theological issues such as God (the Real), humans, salvation, or life after death, and so forth. Among the many different types of truth-claims, at the center are the truth-claims about God or the Real. One of the most obvious examples is God, or the Real as personal in Judeo-Christian traditions and impersonal in Buddhism. It is hard to understand not only different, but conflicting, claims resulting from looking at the same Real, because they not only disagree with each other but stand in contradiction to each other. This is one of the main dilemmas that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis of world religions deals with.

Though admitting these contradictory claims as “the apparently rival conceptions of the Real,” Hick shows the genius of his pluralistic hypothesis by adopting the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon and further appealing to “the principle of complementarity: those whose religious practice is as prescribed by the theistic traditions experience it [the Real] as a personal reality, whilst those who act in relation to it in the ways prescribed by the non-theistic traditions experience it as a non-personal reality” (Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 1989, pp. 374-375). Therefore, Hick applies his pluralistic hypothesis—“the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human”—to truth-claims in order to solve the problem of their apparent contradictions. All the descriptions of world religions’ Ultimate Reality are on the phenomenal level, that is, not literally true. As Brian Hebblethwaite observes, if “they refer beyond the phenomenal to the noumenal Real, they function mythologically” (Hebblethwaite, 1993, p. 129). The mythological understanding of truth-claims, in turn, makes Hick’s hypothesis “less optimistic about cognitive complementarity” (ibid., 130). In other words, the descriptions of the Real become more and more vague as Hick’s system develops.

Moreover, Hick’s claim that “the broad differences between . . . [religions’] different images of the Eternal One arise from the broad differences between human cultures” (Hick, 1982, pp. 86-87) does not give any satisfactory answer to their mutually exclusive claims of the same Reality. If they are their own perceptions or responses of the same Reality, why are they so different from one another? How do we know that their own conceptions originated from the same Real? This leads to the following criticism on how we know whether or not the Real exists at all.
D. The Inaccessibility of the Real

Assuming that everybody is exposed to the same Real as Hick suggests, though it is natural to expect some variations due to the different historical, cultural, and geographical backgrounds, it is unnatural to expect them to be utterly contradictory to each other. As Eddy observes, the main dilemma of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is as follows: “Given Hick’s pluralistic model, one would prima facie expect human perceptions of the single divine Reality to be relatively similar, or at least not mutually exclusive, in nature. Phenomenologically, of course, this is anything but the case” (Eddy, 1994, p. 467). One of the most obvious and problematic dilemmas is the problem of evidently contradictory notions between the divine as a personal Being, and as a non-personal reality. These two responses are too different from each other to be from the single divine Reality. Accordingly, as Firestone observes, “Hick would not want to say . . . that we must think that God as-He-appears is the same God as-He-is-in-himself” (Firestone, 1999, p. 161).

Therefore, we can assume that the Real an sich represented in the work of Hick is knowable, but only in a phenomenological way at most, as he argues, “we speak mythologically about the noumenal Real by speaking literally or analogically about its phenomenal manifestations” (Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 1989, p. 351). As Eddy observes, if Hick’s Real is beyond human cognitive ability, “absolutely nothing can be said or known about the divine in and of itself” (Eddy, 1999, p. 171). Hick’s discussion of the Real is meaningless, because it is at most merely a necessary postulate for his theocentric (or realocentric) model of world religions. This brings us to a question of the circular relationship between the Real as it is in itself, and the Real as experienced and thought.

E. No Connection between the Noumenal Real and the Phenomenal Real

Though Hick does claim that the human religious experience is a “response to reality” as humans were originally structured, he cannot avoid the accusation that his own suggestion is “imaginative projection” (Hick, 2002, p. 153) due to the inaccessibility of the noumenal Real. Hick’s concept of the Real an sich is not based on the direct knowledge of the Real, but is the product of his own hypothesis on the basis of his own understanding of world religions. Therefore, it
must be noted that the linkage between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal Real is not clearly seen, as Hick assumes it is in his claims of religious pluralism. The conceptions of the Real an sich that Hick presents on the basis of his knowledge of world religions seem to be at most a necessary postulate or imagination rather than actual responses to the Real. Accordingly, there is no way to prove any direct connection between the noumenal Real and the phenomenal Real. This failure to prove the necessary linkage between them weakens Hick’s theocentric model of world religions.

V. Conclusion

As discussed above, Hick’s Copernican (or Kantian) revolution in Christian theology involves a radical shift from the traditional teaching that Christianity (the Church) or Christ is at the center, to the interpretation that it is God (or the Real) who is at the center, and that all religions revolve around him. Therefore, it views all world religions as having responded to the same Ultimate Real and all world religions as salvific, but with different perceptions of the Ultimate Real due to their historical, cultural, and geographical differences. Though Hick, over time, has developed his theology of world religions by using different concepts or terms, such as “Copernican revolution” or “Kantian revolution,” his basic framework for pluralism has not changed at all. Though his theory of theocentrism (or Realocentrism) appears to be an ingenious invention that solves the problem of religious diversity, it cannot be a valid theological truth upon which other elements are built. Rather, Hick’s theocentric religious pluralism has several serious implications that are destructive to Christianity as well as his philosophy itself.

First, no matter how hard Hick tries to explain the identity of the Real by means of a Kantian revolution (the distinction between noumenon and phenomenon), he is not successful, because of the inaccessibility of the Real. Hick’s Real cannot be grasped or defined at all, because it is beyond human understanding. Some may even wonder how we know whether or not there is the Real at all. If we have no access to the Real as it is in itself, we must be silent about it.

Second, Hick’s system has not included the possibility of the self-utterance (or revelation) of the Real, as in Christianity, where God has revealed His will to humanity through special revelation like the Holy Scriptures. In Christian theology, though humans have limitation in
their cognitive abilities, God, who is infinite in all ways, is able to make Himself known to humanity as He wishes. This Christian notion of God’s revelation overcomes human beings’ incapability of perceiving God, who is beyond human comprehension.

Third, no doubt Hick’s theocentric model of world religions caused him to reinterpret the Bible, and finally led him to the denial of the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The biblical teaching that Christ is the only way for salvation is incompatible with Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis. Hick’s agenda for the incarnation doctrine was a reinterpretation at first, which eventually led him to reject the traditional foundation of Christian theology, that Christ is God incarnate, through whom we are all saved.

Finally, Hick’s pluralism inevitably led him to the idea that every religion is “a context of human salvation” (Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, p. 33), because each of the great world religions is a response to the divine Real, which means that all will be saved. This in turn implies that there is no use for world mission as the Bible commands. There is no reason for doing mission work for those who eventually will be saved. Though religious pluralism appears to be an attractive idea for those who live in the postmodern world, where people claim that there is no absolute truth and every religion has some good and is equally salvific, it is one of the major obstacles to global mission.

References


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