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**IS JESUS THE ONLY SAVIOR?:  
THE ANSWER TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM  
(Part One in a Three-part Series  
on the Place of Jesus in Salvation)**

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**SYNOPSIS**

Historic Christianity says Jesus is the only Savior and belief in Him is the only hope for salvation (John 14:6). This *exclusive* view has been challenged in recent years by a view known as *pluralism*, which says there are many paths to God or Ultimate Reality. Pluralists such as John Hick, however, have put forth arguments that contain numerous difficulties for their own view. If, for example, God is all-loving, as pluralists have argued, then this means that religions that view God as nonpersonal are false, since to be loving is to be personal. If pluralists respond that we really can't know what God is like, then this contradicts their claim to know that God is all-loving. Pluralists also accuse Christian exclusivists of being intolerant, but if intolerance means disagreeing with someone's view, then pluralists are also intolerant since they disagree with exclusivists. Pluralism, furthermore, seeks to empty all religions of objective truth claims. Anyone who would embrace pluralism, therefore, will have to abandon basic tenets of his or her own faith. Pluralism has been a philosophical failure and, hence, should not be embraced.

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Once upon a time Christians were identifiable by an unqualified commitment to Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of the world, but the unity of professing Christians on this fundamental issue has disappeared. Today, many people who claim to be Christians choose among three fundamentally different answers to the question, "Is Jesus the only Savior?" These answers can be stated succinctly:

- No!
- Yes, but...
- Yes, period!

The negative answer — the belief that Jesus is not the only Savior — is commonly called *pluralism*. People holding this view argue that there are many paths to salvation and that Jesus is only one of those paths.

The unqualified affirmative answer (*Yes, period!*) is undoubtedly the one with which most readers of this article identify. This view is often called *exclusivism* because it teaches that Jesus Christ is the only way whereby men and women can approach God and receive salvation; all other ways are excluded. Sometimes this position is called *restrictivism* because it teaches that salvation is restricted to those who have explicitly believed in Jesus Christ.

The qualified affirmative answer (*Yes, but...*) is the favored view of a growing number of Christian college and seminary professors. Many pastors, Christian workers, and denominational leaders who were

introduced to this view by their professors also would give the qualified affirmative answer. This position is commonly called *inclusivism* because its adherents believe the scope of God's salvation is significantly wider than that held by exclusivists and even includes many who have not explicitly believed in Jesus Christ.

In this, the first of three articles dealing with the place of Jesus in salvation, I will examine pluralism. In the second article, I will explore inclusivism. In the third article, I will look at a related theory that is growing in popularity, namely, the view that people who have never heard the gospel in this life can be saved after death. This theory is often called the doctrine of postmortem salvation.

## THE PLURALISM OF JOHN HICK

At this time John Hick is probably the best-known religious pluralist in the Western world. Hick explains his own view this way: "There is not merely one way but a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation...taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions."<sup>1</sup>

Hick's pluralism went through two stages of development. The earlier stage extended from about 1970 to 1980. The second stage, after 1980, contains the theories for which he is best known. It is important to see that Hick's current pluralism did not appear in a mature, fully developed form. It first took root and then grew sometimes fitfully, as Hick tried first one approach and then another to make his evolving view work. Tracing some of those steps can help us reach a judgment about the value of current arguments for pluralism.

### THE FIRST STAGE OF HICK'S PLURALISM

During the early 1970s Hick regarded his new approach to world religions as so radical that he described it as a "Copernican Revolution." Just as Copernicus had replaced Ptolemy's earth-centered model of the solar system with a sun-centered model, so Hick proposed to replace the historic Christian view that Jesus Christ is the center of the religious universe with the view that God is the center. The view that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ was to be abandoned for a view that sees all the world religions rotating around God. In other words, Hick was abandoning a Christocentric view of salvation for a theocentric model.

There were times when the Ptolemaic astronomers could explain only certain motions of heavenly bodies by postulating orbits on orbits on orbits, called *epicycles*. Epicycles have served ever since as an example of arbitrary and contrived theorizing, not based on evidence but adopted solely to enhance the plausibility of a theory. Hick compares Christians' efforts to protect Christianity from the challenge of the world's religions to the epicycles of the Ptolemaic system; that is, the efforts of any who believe Jesus is the only Savior are contrived and arbitrary. Their efforts, Hick argues, are not prompted by an honest attempt to conform theory to evidence, but they are merely tinkering with their model in order to continue delaying its inevitable demise.

### An All-Loving God Cannot Be Impersonal

In the first stage of his pluralism, Hick appealed to the notion of an all-loving God. He believed the existence of an all-loving God required the rejection of any form of Christian exclusivism: a loving God would not exclude *anyone* from salvation.

Hick also argued that religious beliefs are typically a result of geographic and cultural conditioning. A person born in the American South, for example, is likely to become a Christian, while a person born in Saudi Arabia is not. A just and loving God, Hick reasoned, would hardly punish people for what is basically an accident of birth.

Hick failed to appreciate, however, that many non-Christians would regard his appeal to an all-loving God as an insult or, even worse from Hick's standpoint, as a new kind of exclusivism. Such non-Christians clearly saw how Hick was still operating under the influence of a "narrow" Judaeo-Christian way of thinking. To be all-loving, the God operating at the center of Hick's system would have to be a

*personal* God. Many religious systems, however, express belief in a *nonpersonal* Supreme Principle; others neither affirm nor deny the existence of a personal God.

This created a dilemma. If the “God” of Hick’s new theocentric approach to religion were personal in nature, then he would appear guilty of excluding nonpersonalistic views of God such as pantheism. On the other hand, if he opted for a nonpersonal God at the center, then he would be excluding religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that understand God as personal. Since one of Hick’s objectives was tolerance, it would not help his cause to appear intolerant toward *any* religions. Clearly he had to do something.

Hick’s first search for a way out of his dilemma was to argue that God was both personal and impersonal, as though this would make his system big enough to include theists, pantheists, and everyone else. A little reflection, however, shows how unsatisfactory that move was. The world contains some square objects and some round objects, but it does not and cannot contain objects that are round and square at the same time. Likewise, reality might contain either a personal God or an impersonal god, but it is impossible for the one supreme God to be both personal and impersonal in nature at the same time.

### **An All-Loving God Cannot Be Unknowable**

The unknowability of God would prove to be a key step in Hick’s attempt to rescue his “Copernican Revolution” from a mountain of difficulties. Hick recognized that pluralism could not succeed if any specific knowledge about God is possible. Suppose we knew, for example, that personal monotheism (one God distinct from the world) is true. We could then know that polytheism (many gods) and pantheism (the world is God) are false. If we know that these systems are false, however, then we can hardly continue to view them as being on an equal footing with theism. As a result, we find Hick conceding that God as he, she, or it really exists is unknowable.

Hick failed to see that affirming God’s unknowability only created new problems. In making the claim that God is unknowable, he is really claiming to know at least two things about God. First, he knows that there is a God. Second, to know that God is unknowable is already to know something very significant about God. If God really were unknowable, then we should be unable to know that he is unknowable. Furthermore, Hick’s appeal to the love of God was a claim to know something specific about God. He was clearly contradicting himself.

Hick’s contradictory claims presented a dilemma for pluralism. On one hand, if we can legitimately ascribe any properties to God (e.g., love), then that God with those attributes will conflict with the gods of other religious systems who do not possess those attributes. On the other hand, if no one can have any knowledge about God, then no one can know that God is all-loving; and if no one can know that God is all-loving, then this unknowable “fact” cannot be used as the basis of an attack on exclusivism.

Hick faced yet another difficulty. His claims about the unknowability of God impressed a number of authors who saw that he had moved toward a view of God found in certain Asian religions. Theologian C. Forrester, for example, concluded that Hick’s ideas would be most acceptable to followers of the Vedanta school of Hinduism.<sup>2</sup> If this were so, Hick’s early theory would have had the ironic consequence of replacing Christian exclusivism with the view of a particular Hindu sect, or what amounted to a Hickian version of exclusivism.

It seems clear that Hick’s first attempt at a Copernican Revolution was a philosophical and theological disaster. Instead of his early attempt at pluralism flowing logically from a set of plausible premises, the reverse seems to have been the case. Hick started with a conclusion (Jesus is not the only Savior) and then sought premises to support it. The opponent of a Ptolemaic-type exclusivism had ensnared himself in his own version of it. The self-described enemy of theological epicycles had invented his own.

### **THE SECOND STAGE OF HICK’S PLURALISM**

Stage one of Hick’s evolving pluralism was his move from a Christ-centered approach to religion to a God-centered model. During the 1980s, Hick moved from this God-centered theory to a salvation-

centered model. Behind these changes in Hick's thinking were several ideas he borrowed from the influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant (d. 1804).

Kant distinguished between the way the world appears to us (the *phenomenal* world) and the way the world really is (what he termed the *noumenal* world).<sup>3</sup> The world that appears to us is not necessarily the way the world really is; it is more correct to think of the phenomenal world as a product of the ways our minds force us to conceive of it. All this points to another world "behind" the world of appearance; this is, for Kant, the real or *noumenal* world.

Basic to Hick's transition to a second stage of pluralism was his distinction between God as He appears (the phenomenal God) and God as He really is (the noumenal God). Hick believes the distinction is justified because of the many different and sometimes conflicting ways that the *real* God *appears* to people in the different religions of the world. All of the phenomenal concepts of God we encounter in the various religions are misleading and inadequate. What we should be seeking, Hick says, is God as he, she, or it is in itself.

### **Hick's New Theory of the Unknown God**

In Hick's second stage, he dropped the word "God" from his vocabulary. The old term, he decided, is simply too loaded with Christian connotations. "God" was replaced by words such as *Reality* or *the Real* or *Ultimate Reality*.<sup>4</sup> This major switch in Hick's position was clearly an attempt to escape the mistakes he had made in the first stage of his pluralism, which often found him operating with elements of an older, more theistic, even Christian concept of God. Consistent pluralists should not do that sort of thing.

Even though Hick's God is unknowable, he contends that it is plausible to believe something Real stands behind the various experiences of the world's religions and the Real is essentially the same thing experienced in different, even conflicting, ways.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate, Hick appeals to an old story about five blind men who each touch a different part of an elephant: one identifies the animal as a snake (the trunk), another as a fan (an ear), another as a rope (the tail), another as a pillar (a leg), and the last as a wall (the body). Each of the world's religions similarly describes a different facet of Ultimate Reality. Each religion possesses a partial truth about God, but the whole of the Ultimate Reality (Hick's so-called noumenal God) is unknown and unknowable.

Hick's earlier pluralism resulted in a God that was both personal and impersonal. Hick's newfound distinction between the phenomenal God and noumenal God helped him escape this contradiction. He made the quite different claim that the Real or Ultimate could be authentically thought of and experienced as both personal and nonpersonal.<sup>6</sup>

According to Hick, Christians, Jews, and Muslims perceive the Real as personal, whereas believers in other religions experience the same as impersonal. None of these experiences give us the Real as it really is; instead, the Real affects people differently according to the contexts of their own religious traditions. The noumenal God, he argues, is still unknowable. We cannot know whether it is one or many, personal or impersonal, good or evil, or purposive or purposeless.

If Hick is correct, however, then we really cannot know whether the noumenal God might turn out to be the evil deities of either Jim Jones or David Koresh, two religions that Hick *excludes* from the list of plausible religions. We cannot even logically eliminate the possibility that Hick's noumenal God might turn out to be Satan. Hick is really claiming that a large number of conflicting experiences, all of an unknown God whom we shouldn't even call "God," are somehow supposed to bring us closer to a more accurate understanding of that which is essentially unknowable.

### **A PLURALISTIC VIEW OF SALVATION**

As we have seen, Hick first abandoned a Christ-centered view of religion for one that was God-centered. When that failed, he turned to a salvation-centered view of religion. Once salvation becomes the ultimate test of a genuine religion, however, everything begins to turn on how "salvation" is defined. Consider the options:

If salvation is the attainment of illumination, then perhaps Buddhism can save.

If salvation is union with a Universal Self, then perhaps Hinduism can save.

If salvation is forgiveness and justification, then perhaps Christianity can save.

If salvation is defined as establishing a classless society, then can't we say that communism can save? Did not those systems that practiced child sacrifice, mutilation, or cannibalism also offer what they thought was salvation? Did not Jim Jones offer his followers salvation, even if it came in the form of poisoned Kool-aid? Is not Hick's appeal to salvation/liberation/ ultimate fulfillment so vague and general that he ends up offering a kind of religious supermarket with so many paths to salvation that none can have any ultimate value?

Hick tries to avoid this kind of chaos by insisting that all legitimate forms of salvation exhibit one common trait, namely, a movement from a state of self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness; but how does Hick arrive at this particular concept of salvation? Hick's propensity to oversimplify becomes apparent once we remember that the world's religions not only differ in their understanding of the Ultimate (for some of these religions, there is no Ultimate) but also in their understanding of the basic human predicament and the means by which humans are saved from this predicament. Hick's own proposal for salvation ends up conforming well with some religions while conflicting with others just as much as his concept of God did. Much as he might like to try, Hick cannot escape the pivotal question of truth.

### PLURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

Christians believe the proposition "Jesus Christ is God Incarnate" is true. Muslims believe the proposition "Jesus Christ is not God Incarnate" is true. According to Hick's pluralism, these two propositions should not be viewed as contradictory. He argues that apparently conflicting truth claims are not really truth claims.

Hick believes religious "truth" differs considerably from the kind of truth we encounter in everyday life. Religious truth, rather than being a matter of propositions (e.g., "Jesus rose from the dead"), is *personal*; it is the kind of truth that transforms and changes a person's life. According to this view, it is misleading to talk about the supposed truth of Christ's resurrection as though this were merely an event in the objective world of history.<sup>7</sup> Christ's supposed resurrection becomes true only insofar as it transforms individual people; hence, no religion is true in the objective or propositional sense, but all religions are true subjectively! This personal, subjective view of religious truth ends up implying that the same religious claim (proposition) can be true for me and false for you. It also implies that a religious proposition that was false for me yesterday can *become* true tomorrow.

Hick reduces religious doctrines to myths or pictures that help direct humans toward the infinite, unknowable, divine reality.<sup>8</sup> This is totally foreign, however, to the way most religious believers understand their faiths. It defies common sense to suppose that the people who utter all the competing claims we find in the major religions believe they are doing anything other than truly describing the nature of reality. Not only do the things they say appear as truth claims to our minds, but also the people who utter them understand them to be truth claims. Basic to Hick's approach to the world religions is the conviction that regardless of what the followers of these religions think they are doing, pluralists know better. This is hardly convincing as a foundation for interreligious tolerance.

It simply will not do to downplay, ignore, or minimize the serious and real differences among the world religions. The major religions conflict at the level of essential doctrine. The pluralists claim that doctrinal disputes are irrelevant because they have little or nothing to do with ultimate or noumenal truth flies in the face of the evidence. Most religions insist that correct belief is a necessary condition for salvation. This is certainly the case in Christianity (Acts 16:31 and John 3:16), and parallels to this can be found in non-Christian religions as well.<sup>9</sup>

## THE ISSUE OF ALLEGED INTOLERANCE

Pluralists and many of their allies often accuse exclusivism of being immoral. Christian exclusivists in particular are said to be guilty of intolerance for asserting that religious beliefs logically incompatible with their own must be false. Pluralists seem to forget that the same kind of intolerance must then be attributed to Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu exclusivists, for they also hold to this view.

Christian intolerance is also said to be accompanied by any number of other moral failings including elitism, arrogance, spiritual pride, imperialism, triumphalism, and arbitrariness.<sup>10</sup> I have met a few exclusivists who exhibited moral failings such as those mentioned, but I have no reason to think that these attitudes were a direct consequence of their exclusivism. Many people are mean and nasty in expressing their ideas, including many nonexclusivists. That I do not believe all the things that someone else believes hardly makes me guilty of intolerance. If disagreement entails an explicit or implicit condemnation of certain beliefs as false, then by implication the one who disagrees displays the conviction that his or her beliefs are superior. It should be noted that Hick himself disagrees with the beliefs held by exclusivists. Since his criticism cuts both ways, Hick falls prey to the same “moral failings” he attributes to exclusivists.

Some people assume that any difference of opinion implies a rejection of the person holding the opinion. Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis suggest that pluralists seem “to believe that you can only be nice to people if you agree with them. This seems clearly false. It is both logically and practically possible for us, as Christians, to respect and revere worthy representatives of other traditions while still believing — on rational grounds — that some aspects of their world-view are simply mistaken.”<sup>11</sup> It is clear that disagreeing with other people is not necessarily immoral.

It is also helpful to distinguish between two kinds of tolerance. *Moral* tolerance is acceptance of the other person as a human being who has an equal right to be treated with dignity and respect, even though he or she holds beliefs quite different from one’s own. A different kind of tolerance appears, however, when I am forbidden to judge or criticize the *beliefs* of anyone who disagrees with me. This second, unlabeled kind of tolerance insists that it is wrong, always and everywhere, to disagree with anyone who disagrees with me. Some may treat this position as a form of tolerance, thereby endowing it with an aura of saintliness, but it is in fact a type of intellectual suicide. Hick advances his cause by confusing these two kinds of tolerance, while he himself does not hesitate to disagree with anyone who disagrees with his pluralism. It is this second type of *intolerance* that is part and parcel of the moral attacks Hick and other pluralists make on exclusivists.

Are attempts to convert non-Christians to Christianity a display of intolerance, as pluralists maintain? Evangelizing and proselytizing are sometimes carried out in an unworthy manner, to be sure, but I fail to see how any respectful attempt to persuade another person to change his or her *beliefs* can be an instance of *moral* intolerance.

It also bears noting that exclusivism does not obligate Christians to believe that everything taught by a non-Christian religion must be false. Christian exclusivists can recognize truthful concepts in other religions as well as valuable psychological and moral insights. Exclusivism need not entail narrow-mindedness, arrogance, insensitivity, or self-righteousness. On closer examination, the moral attack on exclusivism appears shallow, unsound, hypocritical, and peevish and should be turned back on the people who raise it. To assault exclusivists in such a personal way without justification is itself a moral failing.

## GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONDITIONING

One of Hick’s earliest grounds for rejecting exclusivism is its alleged indifference to what he regards as the role of geographic and cultural conditioning in determining religious beliefs. No one should be surprised to find that people born in New Delhi, India, become Hindus any more than that people born in Dallas, Texas, become Baptists.

How this information is relevant to judging the truth or falsity of the Christian faith is unclear. Hick’s view that truth is a function of geography and cultural conditioning — that is, where people happen to be

born — has some absurd consequences. This idea, by logical implication, would make Nazism, cannibalism, infanticide, and witchcraft true because they could all be a result of geographic and cultural conditioning. Hick's position also implies that beliefs can be true and false at the same time, true for people conditioned in one way and false for others conditioned in another way. This view would also make the supposed truth of pluralism itself a function of geographic and cultural conditioning.

Roger Trigg notes, "Hick's argument, so far from encouraging us to give equal respect to all world religions, makes us wonder whether religion is any more valid than atheism"<sup>12</sup> — which also would be a function of geographic and cultural conditioning. Trigg finds it ironic that when Hick uses this appeal to encourage greater agreement between Christians and non-Christians, he "can only proceed by emptying the claims of either or both, of all real content."<sup>13</sup>

The biggest dilemma for Hick's contentions, however, is that he himself, born under cultural conditions that might be expected to produce a Christian, was converted to his present non-Christian, quasi-Eastern religious variety of pluralism.

### THE HIGH PRICE OF PLURALISM

One of my purposes has been to reveal the high price that must be paid by any evangelical Protestant or traditional Roman Catholic who may feel attracted to pluralism or who, at least, feels moved by some of its claims. Christians who would embrace pluralism essentially must deny Christian doctrine; they must commit themselves to what amounts to a non-Christian faith. The same price must also be paid by Jews and Muslims who might feel attracted to pluralism. Pluralism's natural home is a small set of offshoots of the larger Eastern religions, but the majority of those devotees will find that movement toward pluralism will require them also to accept major distortions of their faith.

Hick's pluralistic views are presented to many college and seminary students as brilliant, compassionate, and tolerant, and as such his views are having a far greater influence than they deserve. One hopes that Hick's views will be examined ever more carefully and that the unstable foundations of his theory will lead to a more realistic and justly negative evaluation of his claims. Pluralism is hardly an intellectually responsible alternative to the Christian faith.

### NOTES

1. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 34.
2. D. Forrester, "Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976): 69.
3. For a more complete account of Kant's theory, see Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), chap. 11.
4. See John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 158.
5. *Ibid.*, 178.
6. See John Hick, "The Theology of Pluralism," *Theology* 86 (1983): 337.
7. See Ronald Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2002), chaps. 3–4.
8. See John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 178–79.
9. See Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 232.
10. See Hick, *Disputed Questions*, viii.
11. Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis, "On Grading Religions, Seeing Truth, and Being Nice to People — A Reply to Professor Hick," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 77.
12. Roger Trigg, "Religion and the Threat of Relativism," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 298.
13. *Ibid.*