

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE CONTRASTING THEOLOGIES OF
JOHN HICK AND WOLFHART PANNENBERG

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
REL 623 THEOLOGIES OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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The rise of globalism over the last few centuries has forced Christians to rethink traditional views of other religious faiths. Through frequent interaction with other traditions, theologians in particular have begun to question *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and similar exclusivist positions in favor of more open postures toward non-Christians.

Pluralism v. Inclusivism

In this vein, Christian theologian John Hick argues for pluralism, holding that other faith traditions stand on equal footing with Christianity. Wolfhart Pannenberg, however, advocates for inclusivism, the belief that Christ may save those outside the Christian faith, even without their knowing it. By allowing the claims of religious traditions to stand on their own terms and developing a more logically sound argument, Pannenberg makes the more compelling case.

Hick's Pluralistic Argument

Hick rejects the inclusivist model, “benevolent” though it may be, because, like the “intolerant” exclusivist view, it too “rests upon the claim to Christianity’s unique finality as the locus of the only full divine revelation and the only adequate saving event.”¹ Instead, Hick argues that Christianity is merely “*one* of the great world faiths, *one* of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father.”²

Hick believes that, unlike the inclusivist model which allows that those of other faiths can be saved through Christ’s redemptive work, each religious believer is saved “within and through” their own “stream of religious life.”³ He labels the inclusivist attempt to attach “a

¹ John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 22.

² Ibid. Italics in original.

³ Ibid.

Christian label to salvation with these other households of faith,” as “the old religious imperialism” of Christendom.⁴ Hick, therefore, calls for a “Copernican revolution,” in which Christians see all faiths as revolving around the same “ultimate Reality,” albeit in different orbits and along different paths.⁵

Hick posits that one religion could be more correct than another. He admits this, however, as a hypothetical possibility observable only through “the eye of omniscience.”⁶ In the “fallible human view,” all religions “constitute different ways of being human in relation to the Eternal.”⁷ All religions, therefore, stand on equal ground as different expressions of the same attempt to reach the one “ultimate Reality,” whatever that may be.⁸

Pannenberg’s Response

Pannenberg rejects Hick’s call for a “Copernican revolution.” How, Pannenberg asks, can “we come to know the God who stands at the center” without reference to some particular “religious perspective,” Christian or otherwise?⁹ Furthermore, Pannenberg finds Hick’s pluralistic message to be inconsistent with the Christian faith, which proclaims that God has chosen to confide in Jesus Christ the fullness of his self-revelation. Christianity does not deny that God has partially revealed himself through other faith traditions, but it does affirm that “*this*

⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 237-38.

⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims: The Problem of a Theology of the World Religions,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 97.

one God who is also otherwise known in provisional ways can be stated only on the basis of his revelation in Christ.”¹⁰

Pannenberg points to the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25, which suggests that those of other faiths will be welcome into the Kingdom of God. Even there, however, “it is the affinity of their lives to Jesus’ mission and proclamation that will prove decisive in their eternal salvation.”¹¹ Jesus, therefore, “remains the final criterion for all human beings.”¹²

Pannenberg argues that since Christian inclusivism provides for the ultimate salvation of those of other faiths, Hick’s “real problem” with inclusivism is with its Christology.¹³ Indeed, in advocating for his pluralistic version of the Christian faith, Hick denies Jesus’ place as “the second person of a divine trinity.”¹⁴ Hick’s move here is understandable, Pannenberg reasons, because “if Jesus is to be understood as the incarnate son of God, then the claim to Christian uniqueness is inevitable.”¹⁵ Hick must, therefore, distort the very foundation of Christianity in order to make his proposal cohere.¹⁶

Pannenberg argues that different faiths simply make conflicting truth claims. “It is the encounter of conflicting truth claims that challenges each religious tradition to affirm itself in facing those challenges.”¹⁷ While this may require incorporating whatever truth one finds in

¹⁰ Ibid. Italics in original.

¹¹ Ibid., 98-99.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 100.

¹⁴ Hick and Knitter, 31.

¹⁵ Pannenberg, 100.

¹⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

another religious tradition into one's own, it does not mean giving up "on the specific truth claims of one's own tradition."¹⁸ To do that is to "precipitate the end of that religious tradition."¹⁹

Critical Evaluation

A proper analysis of these two arguments should begin with the analogy central to both: the Copernican revolution. Hick pushes for a change of perspective that sees the ultimate divine reality as the sun around which all religious traditions revolve.²⁰ In doing so, however, Hick fails to appreciate the central self-understanding of the Christian message. As Pannenberg points out, no one can grasp the general nature or even the existence of this central "ultimate Reality" without reference to some unique religious tradition.²¹ Believers of all faiths can only recognize the good they see in other religions through the lens of their own, by comparing the "life-giving rays" they enjoy to those that others receive. In that same vein, Christian inclusivists would claim that Christ *is* the sun. The other faiths receive "the sun's life-giving rays," only to the extent they orbit around him and his message.

In addition, Hick's argument raises the question, If all faith traditions are orbiting around some "ultimate Reality," why should individuals be content with their own faith traditions that merely circle but never reach this reality? Should the goal not be to cut across the paths of circling futility to reach the center? In Hick's analogy, if individuals are merely dragged along

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hick and Knitter, 22-23.

²¹ Pannenberg, 97.

involuntarily by their faith tradition—inhabiting one planet—what is the point in pursuing any faith at all, except perhaps to maintain a sense of cultural identity?

Indeed, it is precisely this effort to escape futile wandering that drives most religious traditions. Through faith, humanity seeks to find some fundamental truth with the recognition that there is, in fact, an “ultimate Reality” that humanity can, in some sense, know.

Disagreements among the faith traditions are inevitable. Even assuming *arguendo* that Hick is right in affirming that every religion is attempting to reach the same “ultimate Reality,” they seek the best path to get there because the route matters and the paths are not infinite. A religion aiming for the Andromeda Galaxy can never reach the sun.

By claiming all religions are merely different efforts to reach the same place, Hick collapses their often-contradictory claims, giving short thrift not just to Christianity but to other faith traditions as well. He insists they are all just part of some grand metafaith that looks a lot like the pluralism Hick advocates. Like the inclusivism Hick condemns, this pluralistic system is imposed “benevolently” upon them from above. Further, by denying the divinity of Christ, Hick attempts to make Christianity pluralist by making it unrecognizable to the average Christian. One cannot help then to wonder what similar distortions of other faith traditions his method would require.

The major faith traditions seek to push humanity toward truth and an advantageous self-transformation. As a physicist arguing for string theory can advocate his or her position against another arguing for loop quantum gravity, so those of different religious traditions can dialogue without relinquishing their unique truth claims. It is the interaction and the acceptance of the conflicting claims *as* conflicting that pushes humanity toward truth. Indeed, downplaying the differences may hinder the finding of this ultimate that Hick proposes as the common final goal.

Conclusion

Attempts to promote cooperation and harmony among people of various faith traditions is admirable, but Hick argues for the disregard of all ultimate truth claims among the religions, something most religious people of all traditions would reject. Just as one scientist can think another scientist is wrong on matters of the natural sciences without lacking respect for his or her colleague or eschewing meaningful dialogue, so too can those of different religious traditions disagree about who possesses the greatest truth claims without falling into “imperialism.” All people should respect the dignity and culture of others, but that does not entail a denial of real, sometimes incompatible, differences. Indeed, real respect for cultural differences and religious diversity requires the acknowledgment of that reality.

Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

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Pannenberg, Wolfhart. "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims: The Problem of a Theology of the World Religions." In *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, edited by Gavin D'Costa, 96-106. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990.