IS EVERYTHING RELATIVE?
A RESPONSE TO DR. ISMAIL LATIF HACINEBIOGLU’S
“AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LOGICAL
PREMISES OF PLURALISM”

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ABSTRACT
This paper is an attempt to respond to the issue of relativism in relation to the ideas of John Hick. First, a summary of John Hick’s epistemology is provided. Then, Hick’s “ethical criterion” is examined in the context of religious knowing. It is suggested that whilst Hick does not value absolutist metaphysical claims in any of the world’s religions, he does provide a basis for the making of ethical judgements. That is, religious experiencing must be subject to an ethical criterion which Hick derives from a global theological survey of widely held values across the world’s religions.

Keywords: Logic, Pluralism, John Hick, Relativism, Epistemology.

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John Hick’s views have been hailed as representing either the best way forward for the relationship between world’s religions or they have been repudiated for emptying the religions of any distinctive content, producing an amorphous spirituality too easily co-opted by a popular and shallow western spirituality. Whatever one’s view, Hick’s continued place of prominence in both philosophical and theological debate represents a real achievement. Hick beckons engagement not only because his views have been at the center of lively controversy, but also because his thought is so clearly developed through almost 50 years of publications. Now this


4 For an accessible bibliography of Hick including a list of books both in and out of print see Hick’s website: John Hick, John Hick: The Official Website, www.johnhick.org.uk [29 August, 2006]. Students should be warned that the helpful summary of Hick found on the Boston Collaborative Encyclopaedia is not as rigorous as Badham’s writing and the bibliographies of primary and secondary literature there are far from exhaustive ( “John Hick”, The Boston Collaborative Encyclopaedia of Western Theology, http://people.bu.edu/ wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/ [27 April 2006]).
discussion has extended to the country of Turkey through the work of several scholars including Dr. Ismail Latif Hacinebioglu. At the centre of controversy about Hick lies his pluralist hypothesis in which he maintains that religious traditions are conditionally related to Ultimate Reality. That is, none of the religions can claim to be directly revealed by God (or, as Hick prefers, “Ultimate Reality”) but are each culturally conditioned encounters with a divine noumenon. The concern that is frequently raised about this scheme is that it appears to leave the religious believer with no certain ground upon which to judge religious truth claims. Dr. Hacinebioglu appears to echo this concern, though I hope to demonstrate that Hick’s central ideas may not be as relative as Dr. Hacinebioglu implies.

Dr Hacinebioglu is a philosopher and, as such, has provided a fine summary of Hick’s central pluralistic ideas and their relationship to a modified Kantian epistemology. In fact, to miss how Hick positions himself regarding Kant’s differentiation between the “noumenon” and “phenomenon” is to miss the basis for many of Hick’s central arguments. Accordingly Dr. Hacinebioglu offers a conceptually based analysis of Hick’s logic. I will briefly rehearse this logic by way of three terms Hick uses to typify his approach: “naïve realism”, “non-realism” and “critical realism”. The naïve realist assumes that metaphysical realities and reports of religious experiences are exactly as their sacred scriptures, traditions and/or believers report them to be. The non-realist views these reports as human projections only. In other words, religious statements for the non-realist say everything about the person reporting them and nothing about transcendent reality—they have value only for one

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5 See Dr. Ismail Latif Hacinebioglu’s “An Epistemological Analysis of the Logical Premises of Pluralism” Review of the Faculty of Divinity, University of Suleyman Demirel Year: 2006/1, Number 16: 17-28. For further reflections see Dr. Ismail Latif Hacinebioglu’s “The Realism of Logical Argumentation Versus Philosophical Religious Pluralism” Review of the Faculty of Divinity, University of Suleyman Demirel, Year: 2006/2, Number 17: 1-14.


7 These ideas, introduced in Faith and Knowledge (1957) are repeated and developed throughout Hick’s career and are most forcibly presented in his Gifford lectures: John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 129-232. A succinct restatement can be found in John Hick, Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion (London: Macmillan, 1973), 34.
wishing to further their understanding of anthropology. Non realists who are positive about religious expression view religious testimony as important ways humans have of expressing their highest values. Other non realists, like Marx or Feuerbach, hope that humans will evolve out of religious expression altogether. Finally there is Hick’s position, critical realism. The critical realist believes that there exists a noumenal realm and that this realm does impact our phenomenal experience, but always through conceptual categories that have been conditioned historically, socially, linguistically, geographically, etc. Hick’s attitude towards any one who reports having encountered the divine would be positive in that it would be open to the reality of the report, but it would be critical in that it may not accept the report at face value, but as having been filtered through the reporter’s categories. There is much more that can be said about Hick’s epistemology and how this relates to the subject of pluralism, but let this suffice for now.

Hick’s views have been enormously compelling for religious believers who have grown skeptical of literalistic approaches to their religion but who still believe that their scriptures and traditions do testify to a reality greater than themselves. Still, this will not be enough for a “naïve realist”. To this believer, Hick will appear to have relativized all faiths and is without any ground upon which to make judgments in matters of truth. However, to come to this conclusion is to miss the other key ingredient in the formulation of the pluralist hypothesis: Hick’s ethical criterion.

Hick’s work affirmed the cognitive validity of religious experience, however, it is clear that not all religious experiences are ethically helpful—some are even morally dangerous. Hick cites examples of the latter in reference to George Bush’s so-called divine political mission, the Japanese sect which put nerve gas into the Tokyo underground and the mass suicide of the American Order of the Solar Temple. In light of these and numerous other examples it is clearly not enough to affirm a critical-realistic epistemology—criteria is needed to judge religious experiences.

Hick believes he has found this criterion in an essential ethical testimony common to all religions. That is, across the world’s religions there is an emphasis on the need to be free of selfish, egoistic living and to move towards, compassion, loving-kindness and freedom from ego concern. Hick believes all scriptures testify to these themes. For instance the Qur’an speaks of being patient in hardship adversity

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and times of peril (2:176-7). Buddhism’s Noble 8-fold Path testifies to many ethical principles leading to the end of self-centered craving. Jesus said, “…you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:18). Many more examples could be cited. To be sure, Hick maintains, each of these passages occur in scriptures which have radically different approaches to metaphysics and address different historical and cultural contexts, yet the direction of the believer from self concern towards sainthood is shared. Thus Hick can say with passion:

The conclusion to all this is that the universal criterion of the authenticity of religious experience consists in its moral and spiritual fruits in human life. It is by their fruits that you will know them. This fact distinguishes a global recognition of the significance of religious experience from a moral relativism which requires and indeed permits no criterion of authenticity.\(^9\)

Does having this ethical criterion mean for Hick that one great\(^{10}\) religious tradition seemed clearly ahead of any other in producing ethically evolved human beings? Hick has observed that such a judgement would be impossible to make empirically. In fact all traditions have had their share of saints and sinners, of those who were great moral examples and those who caused strife in the name of their religion. This ethical parity cautioned Hick from assuming that Christianity was truer, for example, than any other religion. If any of the great traditions could produce saints, then this was surely an argument in favour of viewing the religions as each related imperfectly to Ultimate Reality. One’s adherence to a particular religion was an accident of birth, but once a part of that religion, one could find there examples of how to act in the world in ways that manifested divine love and goodness. One would need to use the ethical criterion not to judge which religion was better, but to judge their own actions and the actions of their group in order to manifest more clearly the ethical ideals of their own religion.

We now return to the question: is Hick advocating relativism? On the one hand Hick has a very robust criterion which to judge religious experience and activities carried out in the name of religion. That is, those who testify to having an awareness of a reality beyond themselves may not be taken seriously unless their lives manifest the


\(^{10}\) By “great” Hick means traditions which have a long history of expression which hold together a wide diversity of adherents and which form the main contemporary religions on earth today.
ethical qualities to which their religion testifies. Truth claims without ethical manifestations are suspect. So, ethically, Hick is not a relativist: there is clear criteria and wide agreement on the essential ethical aspects across the worlds’ religions.

On the other hand, metaphysical claims are left in a provisional state. That is, they are relative to a modified Kantian epistemology. One who claims to have received divine revelation, for example, is both supported and criticized by Hick’s approach. He is supported because Hick argues that there is indeed a transcendent reality which impinges upon human life. However, the believer is prevented from absolutizing their faith because of Hick’s belief that statements about the transcendent are always culturally conditioned. This does not mean that truth statements should be abandoned, but that they should be held provisionally and with epistemological humility. Neither does Hick argue for the abandonment of particular truth claims and the establishment of one world religion. Human beings require, he asserts, particular traditions and customs in order to relate to Ultimate Reality. Hick’s vision is one in which the religions remain intact, able to ethically inspire their adherents yet not do violence against other in the name of absolutist metaphysical claims.\(^{11}\)

Hick’s approach will clearly not be welcomed by those who believe that their religion possesses absolute revelation in a superior manner to other religions. It should be welcomed by those who find transcendent reality and ethical direction present in their tradition, but wish to account for truth that appears to them culturally conditioned. In actual fact whilst Hick’s views are growing in popularity within the Christian church he is still very much at the margin, with most Christians feeling their religious identity threatened by his ideas. Hick himself is proceeding despite the criticisms and calling all people to find inspiration in their religious experiences whilst avoiding dangerous enemy of ethical complacency. Hopefully those who find his thinking too relativistic will still join with Hick in his call to “transcend our deeply ingrained self-concern.”\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) David Cheetham, however, raises the valuable point that Hick’s ideas may demand for some the kind of allegiance one would give to an individual religion. If this is true, then Hick’s pluralistic theory may turn into something which Hick says he does not intend: a first-order discourse in which religious believers turn with religious fervour towards Hick’s meta-theory (intended as a second-level discourse) and its implications rather than back to their particular traditions. See Cheetham, *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 112f; 165f.