Comparison of Religions
Based on
John Hick’s Theory on Pluralism
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1. Introduction

“Who am I / What is my identity?” This is one of the most important questions in a person’s life and also one of the most difficult to answer. The identity is developed and internalized mostly during the socialization process in childhood. Part of socialization is to learn what groups to identify with, ingroups, and distinguish them from outgroups that you do not belong to. This is a universal tendency of humans and it gives a bias in people’s thinking to see ingroups as “natural”, as opposed to outgroups with strange and different thinking and behaviour.\(^1\) At the same time we must realise that members of outgroups are human beings, just as ourselves, and that for them, what we see as an outgroup, is an ingroup. When borders and distances between in and out become too adamant and separated it can lead to ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination or racism. This is, unfortunately, common in our contemporary world with globalisation, and migration of large groups of people. One of the most important ingroups is religion or worldview and they are deeply embedded in a person’s identity.

In the world of today there are the great world religions, a number of smaller faiths and a number of other world views that are not based on a transcendental presence, all representing the “truth”. How is this possible? How can many faiths/religions/world views be, at the same time, true? How does a true faith/religion/world view perceive other faiths/religions/world views? Are they exclusive, inclusive, pluralistic, something else or are they ignorant and do not care?

I believe that we today, do not have the luxury to take the easy way out and “don’t care”. World views, ethnic groups and languages are migrating all across the world and are so mixed in today’s society that all of us need to have a view on how to relate to them. If we don’t, there is a risk that we will end up in the traditional “we” (ingroup) and “the others” (outgroup) thinking, making a peaceful and prosperous living more or less impossible for us all. To find out how to relate will not be easy as it questions many internalized perceptions and cultural customs and traditions, both for those migrating and for those resident.

History has shown us numerous examples of wars, uprisings and mass-killings justified by differences in religion, ethnicity, opinion or ambitions for power. Among the recent more prominent atrocities are for example, the Balkan war (based on ethnicity), the Rwandan genocide (based on ethnicity), the Khmer Rouge crimes against humanity in Cambodia (based

on politic). Today we see a chaotic situation in Syria based on, to my understanding, both politics and religion. A number of different factions fight each other in a way that has created a possibility for a cruel organisation; ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) to emerge and grow strong on, what they claim is the basis of religion. Over and over again - “us” against “them”! This “in-group” versus “out-group” thinking is also common on more local levels, like being a fan of a football club. This can also lead to fatal consequences, as in Helsingborg, March 30, 2014, when a fan was beaten to death just because he was a fan of the wrong club.

I hope that Hick´s theory can be used as, or be a starting point for, one of the tools we need to overcome barriers between different world views, including the major religions and secular world views.

The need to overcome barriers and ideological self-righteousness is also Hick´s own opinion as expressed in a lecture delivered in Teheran in February 2005, that the human race lives in a community that is in war with itself, often intensified by religion, and that part of this problem cannot be solved as long as we insist that our own faith is superior to other faiths.2

1.1 Purpose, objectives and problem
Can Hick´s theory about “the Real” be one possible contribution to ease conflicts, tensions and barriers between religions - that would make it well worth further investigation. Can it also be used for “comparison” of religions, and is it really possible to compare religions? What does the word “compare” mean, what would such a comparison contain, how would it be made and for what purposes? If it is possible and there are methods, how can it be made to avoid favourable biases towards one´s own religion? These are substantial and complex questions to answer and it is not possible to include them all in this paper.

Can it be that Hick’s theory is plausible and what would happen if it is?

I will, therefore, investigate critically Hick´s theory of pluralism and its plausibility based on a critical analysis of claims/arguments for and against his theory. I will also discuss what consequences it could, in an imaginary situation, have if the theory is plausible.

To be able to do this critical investigation and find out if the theory is plausible, I need to look into and answer the following questions:

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2 Hick, John: “Religious Pluralism and Islam” (Lecture delivered to the Institute for Islamic Culture and Thought, Teheran, February 2005), page 16.
To find possible consequences in the imaginary situation, I need to look into and answer the following questions (more questions can of course be asked):

- What would be the difference from today’s situation?
- Would it affect many people?
- How would it affect them?

1.2 Previous research

The subject of pluralism has been discussed in numerous books, journal articles, Doctoral dissertations and Masters’ theses. In his book “The Rainbow of Faiths”, Hick mentions 8 books, 59 articles, 7 Doctoral dissertations and 4 Masters’ theses. In another book “Disputed questions” he mentions (in the index) almost 70 authors. What strikes me when reading the names is that almost all of them are from the western hemisphere and thus deeply rooted in the western culture. An exception is for example, Hiromasa Mase who was born in Japan and served at universities in Japan but also in England and US. This makes us wonder how well Hick’s theory is rooted in other cultures and religions. About gender, I also notice that Hick has mentioned only 5 female authors (out of more than 100). A theory by western men for western men?

To mention some of the philosophers that have been involved in discussions about pluralism, I searched Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy for the word “Pluralism”, and found references to Alston, Quinn, Yandell and Schilbrack, who are all men. I wanted to find a female philosopher too and by searching internet I found Harrison who, in her paper, deals not only with Hick’s theory but also with Alston’s critique.

William Alston, University of Chicago, is an exclusivist on the grounds that he does not see any reason for an individual not to persist that her perspective is true. His perspective is based on a distinction of two types of disputes: one when it is clear that one view is superior to the

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others and the other where it is not possible to see the superiority. In religious disputes, he writes, there are no common grounds to resolve disputes and thus religious perspectives are self-consistent. An exclusivist can continue to consider her own perspective superior as it is not rational to stop believing so.\(^7\)

**Phillip L. Quinn**, University of Notre Dame, agrees with Alston that an exclusivist can continue to believe that her religious perspective is true and argues that this is the only rational attitude. In Quinn’s opinion Alston uses a pre-Kantian approach but Quinn himself believes that it is correct for an exclusivist to use a Kantian belief to religion, that religious beliefs are culturally conditioned and not based on real truth of the matter, e.g. on how the Divine reality really is.\(^8\)

**Victoria Harrison**, University of Glasgow, introduces the concept of “Internalist pluralism” that in turn is based on Hilary Putnam’s theory of internal realism. An Internal pluralist regards religious and ethical statements as objectively true or false within a conceptual scheme.\(^9\) Harrison writes that an internal pluralist does not have to see all religious belief systems leading to the same end. She sees this as a problem for Hick’s theory, that all religions make people move towards the same goal and that concepts like salvation, liberation, moksha etcetera are equivalent.

**Keith E. Yandell**, Trinity Evangelic Divinity School, is of the opinion that Hick’s theory about pluralism requires that all religions are false and thus only can be accepted by those rejecting their own traditions.\(^10\) Yandel further writes that Hick’s “Real” has substantial properties and also lacks properties, all to make the theory acceptable to all. This, according to Yandell, is inconsistent with religious pluralism’s core content and is inadequate in itself but also favours traditions that have ineffability as a central concept. Yandell also argues that the pluralistic arguments weakening a person’s conviction in her own religion, including prohibiting of intolerance, may lead to intolerant behaviour and deflate confidence in beliefs needed for tolerance.\(^11\)

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Kevin Schilbrack, Appalachian State University, states in his paper “The Next Pluralistic Philosophy of Religions” that most of the criticism against Hick’s theory can be regarded as reactionary and rejects that religions can have equally valid paths defending exclusivism or inclusivism.\(^{12}\) He is in favour of a new criticism called “more pluralism” meaning that different religions are different recommendations of life based on different understanding of the ultimate and also of different religious experiences. This type of pluralism is soteriological and ontological and can be described as “different paths to different summits”.\(^{13}\) This is opposed to Hick’s “convergent pluralism” that sees differences in religions as different responses to the same single divine reality.

### 1.3 Material

For this paper I have chosen to use two books from the 1990’s of John Hick describing his theory on religious pluralism, namely “Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy or Religion”\(^{14}\) and “A Christian Theology of Religions”\(^{15}\). I will also use Hick’s contribution in the book “Salvation in a Pluralistic world”.\(^{16}\)

The original idea about “One Divine Reality” was first published in Hick’s book “God and the Universe of Faiths”\(^{17}\) and was further developed in his book “An Interpretation of Religion”\(^{18}\), published in 1989, putting forward the theory of “pluralistic hypothesis”.\(^{19}\) I chose not to use these two books as I want to use a later version of the hypothesis and also see Hick’s own responses to his opponents.

To contrast Hick’s theory, I will use an article “Pluralism, A defence of Religious Exclusivism”,\(^{20}\) written by his most prominent opponent, Alvin Plantinga, Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame and, according to Wikipedia, “widely regarded as the world’s most important living Christian philosopher”.\(^{21}\) In the article he opposes pluralism and gives a strong defence to exclusivism.

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\(^{13}\) Schilbrach, Kevin: "The Next Pluralistic Philosophy of Religions", page 1.


\(^{15}\) Hick, John: *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*.


To show a very different type of criticism I will also use an article by Keith E. Johnson, from 1997, “John Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis and the problem of Conflicting Truth-claims”. 22
Keith E Johnson is National Director of Theological Education for Cru which is a religious organisation with the mission to spread the word of Jesus. 23 “Cru has been on campuses for over 60 years, helping students come to know Jesus, grow in their faith and then go to their families, their communities and all over the world to tell others about God’s love”. 24

Hick developed his theory over years and, because of this, I will also use a Lecture delivered to the Institute for Islamic Culture and Thought, Teheran, by John Hick in February 2005. This lecture is very interesting as it is delivered in a Muslim country with a strictly religious government led by a tolerant Seyyed Mohammad Khatami 25 who advocated freedom of expression, and with a Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khameni being the most powerful person in the country. For Iran, the US, has been (since 1979), looked upon as the Great Satan and Russia and Israel regarded as “Lesser Satan”. 26 This article shows Hick’s late opinions about both his own theory and his prime opponent, Plantinga, and his criticism.

To find a base for theories about identity, based on socialization, internalisation and forming of ingroups and outgroups (us and them), I have used a book in Social Psychology as this subject is about the phenomenon of social influence that includes behaviour, thoughts, feelings as well as public (overt) acts. Religion is to me very much about the same thing: social and cultural influence. In the opening pages of the book is stated that “At the very heart of social psychology is the phenomenon of social influence”. 27 This is, to me, also Hick’s opinion about identity/religion, and he writes “we are so largely formed by our culture”. 28

1.4 Theory and concepts

1.4.1 Definition of concepts

Definitions of important concepts I have used in this paper, to avoid ambiguity and to be able to reduce the amount of text:

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- **Salvation**: (Theology) “The redemption of man from bondage of sin and liability to eternal death, and the conferring on him to everlasting happiness”\(^{29}\)

- **Arguments with informative character**: an argument that is valid or invalid\(^{30}\)

- **Arguments with practical character**: an argument that cannot be verified nor falsified

- **Culture**: “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time”\(^{31}\)

- **Egotism**: “The feeling or belief that you are better, more important, more talented, etc., than other people”\(^{32}\)

- **Exclusivist**: someone is a religious exclusivist with respect to a given issue when she believes the religious perspective of only one basic theistic system (for instance, only one of the major world religions) or only one of the variants within a basic theistic system (for instance, within Islam) to be the truth or at least closer to the truth than any other religious perspective on this issue.\(^{33}\) A Christian exclusivist believes that salvation is available only through the faith in God’s act in history, especially through the work of Jesus Christ. There are a lot of preconceptions about the term “exclusivism” and some authors suggest the use of “particularism” instead to enable a fair hearing and discussion.\(^{34}\) Islam had from the beginning an exclusivist view on pagans but an inclusive view of “the people of the book”, i.e. Christians and Jews\(^{35}\)

- **Inclusivist**: many faiths can be true and that salvation can take place in all faiths. But from a Christian point of view, salvation is universal and given through the work of Christ only, in every culture, place and time. Christ is thus seen as secretly at work in all religions.\(^{36}\)

As for Muslim inclusivism, “Shahid Mutahhari is a respected proponent of Muslim inclusivism. Non-Muslims are at a disadvantage because it is the Islamic Divine Law that leads people to God. And those who fully understand this law (Islam) but choose not to accept the truth will be damned. However, in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence, God will be merciful to those who seek the truth but from whom, through no fault of their own, the reality of Islam remains hidden. Such people cannot


be called unbelievers; they are rather “dispositional Muslims” since it is possible to possess the requisite spirit of submission without being Muslim in name. And these individuals will receive the divine grace necessary to achieve salvation from Hell, Mutahhari, 2006; Legenhausen, 1997”. 37

This according to Hick, means that Christ must be seen as a non-historical Logos pre-dating Jesus, Moses and all other prophets. This Logos, can be given other names like the Ultimate or the Real. Hick suggests that the concept of inclusivism is not clear and that it is close to pluralism. He also claims that inclusivism do not acknowledge the religious lives of non-Christians. 38

- **Ineffable**: something having a nature that cannot be described or thought of by use of human concepts

- **Logos**: Reason within humankind, sometimes treated as the principle governing the cosmos, as in Stoicism and in Philo and Christianity where Logos is also creator and mediator. 39

- **Ontological**: relating to or based upon being or existence. 40

- **Pluralist**: “someone is a religious pluralist with respect to a given issue when she claims not only (as a non-exclusivist) that no specific religious perspective is superior but also makes a positive claim about the truth of the matter. The nature of this claim depends on the type of issue in question. If the issue is one on which there could be more than one truthful perspective — for example, the sufficient conditions for spending eternity in God’s presence — to be a pluralist is to claim that the religious perspectives of more than one basic theistic system or variant thereof can justifiably be considered equally close to the truth, Marbaniang 2010”. 41 A pluralist believes that salvation is available through all major world religions.

  - **pre-Kantian beliefs**: to believe that we have access to the truth as it really is, e.g. we know what God really is

  - **Dass Ding an sich**: (In Kant’s philosophy) a thing as it is in itself, not mediated through perception by the senses or conceptualization, and therefore unknowable. 42

  - **Kantian beliefs**: the world cannot be understood as it is (noumenal world) or as “Dass Ding an sich”. It is always perceived through a personal perception (a lens)

37 Basinger, David: “Religious Diversity (Pluralism)”.
41 Basinger, David: “Religious Diversity (Pluralism)”.
- **Propositional evidence**: evidence based on propositions – bearers of truth and falsity, what is true or false.\(^{43}\)

- **Religion**: “A cultural system of behaviours and practices, world views, ethics, and social organisation that relate humanity to an order of existence”.\(^{44}\) Other definitions mentioned on the same page in Wikipedia: William James “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine”; Durkheim “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”\(^{45}\)

- **Soteriology**: theology dealing with salvation, especially as affected by Jesus Christ.\(^{46}\)

- **Paradigm**: universally recognized scientific achievements that for a period of time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners (as defined by Thomas S. Kuhn)\(^{46}\)

- **World view**: “a fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the entirety of the individual or society’s knowledge and point of view. A world view can include natural philosophy; fundamental, existential, and normative postulates; or themes, values, emotions, and ethics”\(^{47}\)

- **Mythologically true**: a statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke a proper dispositional response to X.\(^{48}\)

- **Trans-historical**: Holding throughout human history, not merely within the frame of reference of a particular form of society at a particular stage of historical development.\(^{49}\)

- **Epistemology**: the study of knowledge, to determine the nature of knowledge (what does it mean to say someone knows) and to determine the extent of human knowledge (how much do we and can we know)?\(^{50}\)

### 1.4.2 Theory

Hick is influenced by Kant and his ideas about perception as an active process by means of human concepts, thus the world cannot be understood as it is (noumenal world) or as “Dass Ding an sich”. It is always perceived through a personal perception (a lens) built on common

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\(^{43}\) Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [http://www.iep.utm.edu/evidence/#SH1a](http://www.iep.utm.edu/evidence/#SH1a).


\(^{46}\) [http://projektintegracija.pravo.hr/_download/repository/Kuhn_Structure_of_Scientific_Revolutions.pdf](http://projektintegracija.pravo.hr/_download/repository/Kuhn_Structure_of_Scientific_Revolutions.pdf), page viii.


human concepts and personal experience. This lens is, according to Hick, always developed within a culture.

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, published 1781, Kant refuted David Hume’s casual connection argument that it is only habit that makes us see casual connections. He argued instead that causality is an attribute of human reason that “perceives everything that happens as a matter of cause and effect”.\footnote{https://askaphilosopher.wordpress.com/2011/11/24/kant-on-our-ignorance-of-things-in-themselves/, downloaded 2016-04-27 at 17:32.} This law of causality is built in the human mind. Kant argues that we cannot with certainty know what the world is in itself (noumental), we can only know how it looks for me and other humans (phenomenal). But before things are experienced we know, a priori, how they will be perceived by our mind. The mind, according to Kant, includes conditions that help us understand the world. These conditions include the law of causality and modes of perception, space and time. Of these space and time are forms of intuition used to interpret what is happening. We cannot say that they belong to the phenomenal world, only that they are part of our perception of the world. They are a priori forms of intuition that guide us when transforming sensory experiences into thoughts and predetermine the way we think. Kant argued that what we experience will first be perceived as phenomena in time and space and that humans want to know why it occurs; i.e. its causality.

\subsection*{1.5 Method}

Part of the paper will be about, by use of the selected material, a critical analysis of Hick’s theory by use of a claim/argument analysis based on Grenholm’s methodology to see how the theory is justified. To do this I will start by outlining the circumstances leading Hick to develop the theory and the basic ideas behind it. To enhance understanding I will also include some of Hick’s critics and critically investigate and describe how they argue for or against his theory. A major critic is Alvin Plantinga and I will look more deeply into his arguments against Hick’s theory.

Grenholm’s method is divided into two phases, first a descriptive phase to give an overview of claims/arguments; then a second phase to critically evaluate the given claims/arguments.\footnote{Grenholm, C-H: *Att förstå religion – Metoder för teologisk forskning*, page 283-284.}

In the first phase, three questions are to be answered, namely: a) what problem is the author describing b) what thesis is the author suggesting in the text c) what claims/arguments are given and how do they support the thesis. The claims in support of the thesis or the arguments for (and against) the thesis are to be described as clear and understandable as possible. Some
claims/arguments can be presupposed in the text and thus are hard to find and some might have a need to be amended by reasonable interpretations. The next stage of the descriptive phase is to make an overview of the claims/arguments and how they relate to the thesis and clarify each of them to see if they have an informative character or a practical function.

In the second phase, I will critically evaluate the claims/arguments and thesis to see if the claims/arguments are valid. This includes a personal stance to the claims/arguments. Grenholm points out that scientific statements, facts and results shall be possible to test by others and give the same results; I will keep this in mind when evaluating the claims/arguments. For a claim/argument to be valid it must fulfil two conditions: a) it shall be logically true (informative arguments) or fair (practical function arguments); and b) the claim/argument shall be relevant, that is - does the claim/argument really support the thesis and can it, together with some other premises, logically lead to the thesis (is the claim/argument logically consistent). Both conditions a) and b) must be fulfilled for the claim/argument to be valid. About practical argumentation, Grenholm means that moral opinions can be part of a logical conclusion but in these cases it is not true that the conclusion always is true when both statements are true, but the conclusion is instead to be held as reasonably true.

From the critical analysis, I will look into what consequences it could have, in the imaginary situation below, if the theory would be plausible:

*Breaking news from Reuters: Top religious leaders from the major world religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism has during a summit in Geneva come to the conclusion that all religions in fact worship the same God, the Ultimate Real.*

Lastly, I will give my own reflections about the theory and its plausibility.

### 2. Hick’s theory

Hick states that the holy books of Islam have writings indicating that Islam worship the same God as Christians, and that a Muslim should say to a Christian and a Jew that “We believe what has been sent down to us, and we believe what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit”. 53 He also points out that the New Testament has a lot of references to the Torah that the kingdom Jesus proclaimed is for the same God as the

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53 Hick, John: *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, page 146.
God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and concludes “Clearly then, according to the New Testament, the God whom Jesus called his heavenly Father was also the God of whom the Torah had previously spoken”.\(^{54}\) Hick then suggests that these three Abrahamic religions all worship the same God. In this, Hick sees a number of complicating aspects as the concept of God has both a universal aspect linking to the human race and a particular aspect linking to particular individuals and historical groups. Can the findings in these three Abrahamic religions be extended to be valid for the whole human race?

Based on this thinking, Hick put forward an important question about all religions, “Do we all worship the same God”?\(^{55}\)

This question (and its answers) was/is controversial and has given rise to a lot of discussions and led to many publications. I will look closer at some of the more prominent responses.

Hick gives four possible answers to the question:\(^{56}\)

1. That we do indeed worship the same God but call him with different names. This answer is rejected by Hick on grounds that the descriptions of them are too different for this to be a possibility. He especially points at the history of Allah that is different to the Christian Trinity God that in turn is different to the God described in the Torah and Talmud

2. That the three stories in Judaism, Christianity and Islam can be combined into one and the same story. To this Hick does not give a definite answer. He only indicates that it is a possibility that is plausible

3. That all religions worship the same God (or Entity, the Real) but only by means of very different descriptions and without realizing that all of these descriptions refer to the same Entity

4. That the answer is no, we do not worship the same God. Only my faith’s description of God is true and all others are in error

Hick introduces the three concepts of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism and discusses them from two aspects: salvation and truth claims.

The pluralistic hypothesis Hick advocates is close to “That all religions worship the same God”, namely that:

\(^{54}\) Hick, John: *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, page 146.

\(^{55}\) Hick, John: *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, page 146.

“All religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality”.\(^\text{57}\) And that “the great post-axial\(^\text{58}\) faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it”.\(^\text{59}\)

### 2.1 What is the background to the theory?

Hick grew up in a not very religious family in England but he had an interest in religion from childhood. He studied law when he, at age 18, had a strong religious experience and accepted evangelical Christianity. His opinion at that time was that faith is based on religious experience and not on propositional evidence.\(^\text{60}\) Later in life (in the late 1960s), Hick had another experience that changed his life again when he was working on race issues, together with people of other faiths. From the time he spent in mosques, synagogues and other sacred places, he realised that even though the sermons and languages etcetera were different they all did the same thing to people, i.e. to “open their minds and hearts “upwards” toward a higher divine reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives”.\(^\text{61}\) They experienced the Transcendent just as Christians do” but interpreted it differently due to intrinsic factors shaped by doctrine, culture and history,\(^\text{62}\) i.e. through a personal culturally shaped lens. Hick states that the public awareness of other cultures and religions is also much greater today due to a) an enormous increase of information (in the west) about other religions, b) increased travel to other cultures with other religions, like India etcetera, and c) a massive immigration from east to west of people of other religions.\(^\text{63}\) This makes it possible to compare religions and to realise that people of other faiths in general are just like Christians, no better nor worse human beings. Their moral and spiritual concepts and behaviour are on a par with Christians. He continues to state that it doesn’t seem possible to compare religions in any way to establish superiority of the Christian faith. This, in turn, Hick argues, shows that it “is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths”\(^\text{64}\). This is at the very base of Hick´s hypothesis.

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\(^{58}\) “Axis age” refers to the period 800 BC to 200 BC. The concept was first used by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers about a period that saw revolutionary development of the world’s philosophies and religions. “Post-axial age” refers to the period from 200 BC until today.


2.2 Basic ideas of the theory

Hick’s aim is not to show that God exists but to show how God can be known and how that knowledge relates to other forms of knowledge. In this Hick argues that religious knowledge is acquired by personal experiences of God and thus must be mediated through our senses and previous experiences of the world. To understand mediation, Hick relies on Kant’s theory about phenomenal (the world perceived by humans) and noumental (das Ding an sich - the world as it is, unperceived) and argues that the experience of all Gods is made at a phenomenal level, through our senses.

Hick argues that 1) There is one divine reality that is the ultimate source of all religious experience, The Real 2) direct perception of the Real is not possible for any religion 3) the Real is authentically conceived and experienced though each religions tradition 4) It is not possible to describe the Real. We cannot understand the Real as it really is, it is outside of human thinking and concepts, it is transcategorial or ineffable. The Real, is then the ultimate source of all religious experiences but cannot be described by any one religion.

Hick elaborates the concept of the Ultimate, the Real, that he sees as something that “transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself”. It is creator of the universe and the source of human beings and what we regard as our meaning of existence, maybe even evokes a response that can be called religious.

To overcome the traditions in the three Abrahamic religions, it is necessary to have a global scope when thinking about the Ultimate. Hick puts forward the hypothesis that religions do not describe the Ultimate, or by the preferred name The Real, as it is in itself but how it is mediated through human thinking, perception and cultures.

2.3 How are the basic ideas justified?

To start with Hick finds that he cannot support the idea that Christianity is superior to the other world religions. He concludes this from looking at his friends and people of other faiths that he had met. Hick also compares the scriptures and literature of three faiths, Christianity, Islam and Judaism and again, cannot see that either of them is superior, morally or spiritually to the others. What he finds is that each of the three Abrahamic faiths “calls us to treat

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others as we would wish to be treated ourselves” and that calls us to be just, honest and truthful and to care for those (…) who cannot care for themselves”. This leads Hick to propose a thesis that the three Abrahamic religions have the same moral insights in universal values of justice, peace and happiness.

Hick argues that, if the three Abrahamic religions are taken seriously, there must be a distinction between the three manifestations of God and the One Universal God. He then proposes, based on Kant’s distinction between something as it is in itself and how it is perceived by humans, that the three Gods indeed are different manifestations of the same universal God. The manifestations are perceived through physical filters formed by the culture a person lives in. This means that each person actively forms his perception of the world. This is, according to Hick, demonstrated in other sciences too, like cognitive psychology and sociology. As Hick writes “we are aware of God, not an sich (…) but as God is thought of and experienced through the conceptual ’lens’ of our own traditions”. This also means that as there are many cultural lenses, there are also many ways to think of and experience God thus explaining that the historical Gods are all projections of the universal divine presence formed by religious imagination. This model of the Real, leads Hick to insist on two perceptions: first on the own traditions beauty with its unique history and that we try to live and contribute to it. Second, to accept the equal right of others to view and live according to their own traditions in the same way as we do.

Hick suggests that these different perceptions of the Real show that each tradition/religion has an exclusivist interpretation and that it is a human contribution that leads to a limitation of the perception of God. Each religion has generated its own myths and self-enhancing metaphors about the chosen people and the incarnate God, that all of these myths are true, in the sense that they call forth adequate response of devotion. So, all three Abrahamic religions are from a religious point of view authentic expression of the Real. This is an alternative interpretation of the concept of faith, i.e. “in the claim made within each tradition that it alone embodies the only fully valid and efficacious form of relationship to that Reality”. Hick argues that this interpretation is more plausible than three other positions: A) Atheism, which Hick is not interested in and thus does not discuss further. B) Exclusivism, which Hick rejects on grounds that the effect of devotion to different Gods are very similar in

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71 Hick, John: Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion, page 156.
72 Hick, John: Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion, page 159.
73 Hick, John: Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion, page 159.
both good things like overcoming self-centeredness and in bad things like giving a valid
ground for greed and aggression. C) Polytheism, that all Gods are real ontological beings.
This view is not preferred by Hick due to the reason that many religions state that their God is
the source of the universe, and this cannot be true as there can only be one creator and source
of the universe.\footnote{Hick, John: \textit{Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion}, page 170.}

To solve this problem, Hick suggests that we must accept the idea that both (or all) religions
are authentic appearances to human minds of the same God, of the Real \textit{an sich} (as such or in
itself).\footnote{Hick, John: \textit{Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion}, page 171.} Hick explains this by a comparison about how personality, and identity, develops in
an interaction between persons and points out that if there was no relationship at all, we would
all have “solitary consciousness” and “no persona”, as personality is basically interpersonal.
So the development of Gods is made within the history of human cultures and religions
leading to different manifestations of the same solitary Real, as a range of personal deities.

Hick claims that this formation of the Real, but as non-personal absolutes, is possible also
within non-theistic traditions, like Buddhism, but points out two obstacles for this to be. First,
can what is experience in non-theistic mysticism be expressions or the Real? To this Hick
claims that in Hinduism Brahman is seen as the Ultimate Reality and that the tradition of an
ultimate Reality is deeply embedded in Buddhism. Secondly, there is a general difference in
views of western and eastern traditions, where mysticism plays a much larger role in the east.
To this Hick claims that mysticism within Hinduism and Buddhism “reports a direct,
unmediated, often unitive, awareness of the Ultimate”.\footnote{Hick, John: \textit{Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion}, page 175-176.} This leads to the conclusion that
there is “a plurality of impersonae as well as of personae of the Real”.\footnote{Hick, John: \textit{Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion}, page 177.} All of these
manifestations are created through various cultural and religious lenses and is not the Real \textit{an
sich}.

About the Real itself, Hick argues that we can only say that it is the ground of religious forms
of different kinds when they are more than human projections and that we cannot use any of
the human concepts, personal or impersonal, to describe it as human experience does not
apply to it.\footnote{Hick, John: \textit{Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion}, page 177.} Thus, Hick states, we cannot use the Real as such, as an object for a religion, it is
not possible to worship it nor achieve union with it. What can be worshipped is a different
culturally developed manifestation of it.
What use does Hick see of his hypothesis? He puts forward three possible uses: 1) that it gives a base for understanding that no one of the world religions is the only true religion; 2) that is takes away the inclination to believe that all religions/traditions are the same and at the same time make it possible for us to see all variations in the religions; 3) that it gives a framework for dialogue between faiths and enables us to broaden our thinking and knowledge about the Real.  

2.4 Criticism raised against the theory

John Hick was an original thinker who did not fit into the main stream thinking in, for example, philosophical naturalism or established orthodoxies of Conservative Christianity. His work are both influential and often criticized. According to Hick himself “he has been attacked from different quarters as anti-Christian, as too narrowly Christian, as an atheist, a polytheist, a postmodernist, and as a not postmodernist enough!” Due to this span of criticism I choose to use two very different critics and describe their objections to and arguments against Hick´s hypothesis. First, Alwin Plantinga, who is one of the most important contemporary Christian philosophers. Second, I will contrast his criticism with an article by Keith E Johnson who is National Director of Theological Education for Cru which is a religious organisation with the mission to spread the word of Jesus.

2.4.1 Alwin Plantinga

One of the main opponents to Hick´s theory is Alwin Plantinga. In his article A defense of Religious Exclusivism he outlines his opinion of why exclusivism is a proper view of religion and faith. In the opening of his article, he describes the atmosphere at Yale, where he studied as a graduate student, as very diverse and open for discussions on many topics that each had a number of arguments for and against them. In all this, there was one question that was regarded as unduly naïve or arbitrary and that was “what is the truth about this matter”. This attitude, Plantinga argues, is also valid for the world religions. Is it possible to argue that one of them is true thereby making all others false? At the base of his arguments, for exclusivism, are two propositions (1) and (2) and one condition (C):

84 https://www.rts.edu/Sevnmary/Faculty/bio.aspx?id=696, downloaded 2016-04-17 at 19.47.
(1) The world was created by God, an almighty, all-knowing, and perfectly good personal being (one that holds beliefs; has aims, plans, and intentions; and can act to accomplish these aims)

(2) Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way to salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son. 86

(C) Being fully aware of other religions; be aware that there seems to be genuine piety and devoutness in them; believe that there are no arguments to convince others to follow your religion.

He also put forward a question about how an awareness of other religions affects his own religion and religious beliefs. The answer Plantinga gives is that there are many possible reactions and that one of them is to continue to believe what you believe - exclusivism. This also means to believe that your own religion/faith is correct and all others are false. Plantinga states that he wants to explore why the concept of exclusivism by many is seen as something wrong, “It is irrational, or egotistical and unjustified, or intellectually arrogant, or elitist, or a manifestation of harmful pride, or even oppressive and imperialistic”. 87 In particular, he investigates two main allegations against exclusivism, first that it is morally or ethically wrong and secondly intellectually or epistemically wrong.

About moral objections to exclusivism

Plantinga states that to be an exclusivist is to believe that those believing something incompatible are mistaken and are in error and fail to believe in something true. This is, according to Plantinga, not arrogant or egoistical as he only sees three possible alternative responses to proposition (1): Hold it; withhold it, or accept its denial. Plantinga regards the third way as pluralistic, holding that all religions are false about (1) and (2) but still valid responses to the Real. This is to believe many propositions others do not believe in and thus be in condition (C), i.e. in the same position as an exclusivist. To conclude, Plantinga states that if to believe in (1) and (2) is sufficient for arrogance and egotism, so is the denial of them. The second way, to withhold the proposition, is to end up in a situation that you do not believe in the proposition nor its denial. When the conviction to (1) and (2) is to abstain from belief (or not) is reached by careful reflection in the light of pluralism, Plantinga argues that it

is not possible to accuse these attitudes for egotism. So open to Plantinga is the first option – to hold the proposition.\(^\text{88}\) Furthermore, he cannot see any possibility to sustain a moral charge against exclusivism.

**About epistemic (intellectual) objections to exclusivism**

The main epistemic objections are that an exclusivist is irrational and lacks justification of his exclusivist beliefs.\(^\text{89}\) Is exclusivism really unjustified and what does unjustified mean? Plantinga states that justification is an ever-changing concept, but points at two possibilities to interpret it: the first is “being within one’s intellectual rights”, i.e. not breaking any intellectual or cognitive duties or obligations when forming and sustaining a belief. Duties involved are epistemic duties such as evidence or to stay in the right relation to the truth. An exclusivist, according to Plantinga, complies with these duties when he concludes, after careful consideration that (1) is true. It is therefore difficult to see that exclusivism is unjustified by intellectual rights.\(^\text{90}\)

The second is “to be intellectually arbitrary”, behind this allegation might be an idea that similar cases should be treated similarly and that exclusivists arbitrarily chooses to believe (1) and (2) even though there are conflicting religious beliefs. This would not be true if, after consideration, you believe that other beliefs are not as good as, or on an epistemic par with, yours. An exclusivist thinks that (1) and (2) are true and other propositions contradicting them are false.\(^\text{91}\) Plantinga does not see any difference in thinking between an exclusivist and a pluralist, they both claim that the other’s belief is not on an epistemic par with their own belief and thus continues to believe what he already believes.

Is an exclusivist irrational? To answer that question Plantinga first gives five definitions of rationality: 1) Aristotelian rationality, a man is a rational animal that can look before and after and has the power of thinking 2) Deliverance of Reason, knowledge a priori, propositions that are self-evident for human beings 3) Deontological Sense, intellectual requirements, or duty, or obligation 4) Zweckrationalität, means-end rationality that actions are calculated to achieve goals 5) Sanity and Proper Function, absence of dysfunction, disorder et cetera with respect to rational abilities. About 1) and 2) Plantinga argues that for an exclusivist to be irrational in these senses there must be good reasons to the denial of the exclusivist’s beliefs. About 3)}
Plantinga argues that to be irrational in this sense is to hold on to beliefs that violate a duty or obligation. Plantinga gives an example that some thinkers today claim that without propositional evidence belief in God is irrational. To Plantinga, this sense of rationality is included in “2) Deliverance of reason” and thus is not irrational. About 4) to Plantinga this is about knowing what you want and how to achieve it. He then argues that it is not clear if this sense of rationality can be applied to beliefs. He argues that it is not obvious that believing is an action and that this action also is taken to achieve a goal, “we don’t have a choice as to whether to have beliefs, and we don’t have a lot of choice with respect to which beliefs we have”. This, to Plantinga, means that an exclusivist is irrational only if he believes in something that nobody else believes and applied to (1) and (2) means that the exclusivist is irrational only if both are false. Thus Plantinga concludes that he cannot find that an exclusivist should in any of these definitions be irrational.

Does an exclusivist have warrant for the exclusivist view? Pluralists, such as Hick, declare that an exclusivist cannot know that his view is true. Plantinga argues this by stating that it may very well be that an exclusivist knows (1) and (2) by internalistic accounts of knowledge, so that a believer is justified to believe as she does as she is not violating any intellectual or cognitive obligations or duties.

Plantinga sees a risk in the awareness of plurality, that it undermines the exclusivist belief in (1) and (2) but he also, on the other hand, sees it as something that can lead to a reassessment of the religious life and a deeper apprehension of (1) and (2).

Plantinga ends his article about exclusivism with a statement that pluralism “could initially serve as a defeater, but in the long run have precisely the opposite effect”.

2.4.2 Keith E. Johnson

Johnson starts his article by stating that Hick´s hypothesis is worth investigating due to three reasons: 1) that the theory is intuitive in the belief that all religions lead to the same destination 2) that Hick is one of the most persuasive pluralists and that he writes with precision 3) that Hick´s hypothesis is one of the best conceptualisations of pluralism that Johnson has experienced.
Pluralistic theories, according to Johnson, immediately run into difficulties about contradictory truth-claims made in different religions. Can they all be manifestations of the Ultimate when they tell different things and contradict each other? For Hick’s theory to be plausible, Johnson argues, there is a need to explain this adequately and at the same time keep the hypothesis “free from internal inconsistency and accurately handle religious phenomena without distorting it”.98

According to Johnson, Hick’s theory tries to explain 4 factors:
1) that people are naturally religious 2) that content of religious beliefs are different 3) that religious belief is real 4) that religions change people’s lives for the better.99 Of these four factors Hick starts his discussion with the third – that religious beliefs are not illusions, but do exist independent of perception. This, according to Johnson, leads Hick to the assumption that there is an Ultimate Real that is the foundation of all religious experiences. The conflicting understanding in the different religions is explained by none of them having direct access to the Real; the understanding is conceptualised through religious traditions, “lenses”. Johnson points out that Hick’s theory is intuitive as it gives an explanation and a framework to “claim that any religion which positively transforms its followers’ lives is valid”.100 This is the basis of Johnsons criticism; that Hick’s theory must be able to explain the conflicting truth-claims between religions.

Johnson now moves on, in An Interpretation of Religion, to describe Hick’s discussion of conflicting truth-claims on three levels:
1) matters of historical facts 2) matters of trans-historical facts 3) differing conceptions of the Real.101 Historical disagreements are very hard, if not impossible, to find facts to resolve and Hick acknowledges this but claims that this is not a problem for his theory. Trans-historical conflicting truth-claims do have, in principle, an answer but are impossible to settle as historical evidence is missing. Hick claims that this type of conflict has a true answer: that if conflicting truths are treated as mythologically true they are easier to resolve, that dogmatism brings about racism and, lastly, that what you believe of afterlife is not connected to the ability to get salvation.102 About conceptions of the Real, Hick insists that the Real is authentically manifested in all religions thus not creating a problem for his theory.
To all this, Johnson puts forward a number of questions about truth-claims: do religions make truth-claims, what kind of claims, how do they conflict and do they undermine Hick´s theory?  

About truth-claims, Johnson states that scholars dispute this fact and claim that religious truths do not have any ontological status. Johnson then goes into a long discussion about the nature of truth, ending it with Hick´s distinction of “literal truth” and “mythological truth” where the latter is “a statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke a proper dispositional response to X”. This, according to Johnson, leads to the conclusion that any conflicting literally true religious belief must be considered mythological. This highlights an inconsistency in Hick´s theory leading Hick to interpret conflicting truth-claims as mythological to avoid contradictions. To this, Johnson objects that to satisfy the theory, Hick treats logical facts of different religions as mythological.

Johnson´s second problem with Hick´s theory is that it is too revisionistic; redefining concepts in a non-acceptable way to religious adherents. As an example Johnson uses the definition of salvation/liberation that Hick defines as something temporal but Christianity, according to Johnson, refers to a life beyond the grave. This revisionism, Johnson writes, makes one question “whether religions actually make any meaningful truth-claim”.

Johnson states that in logic, a proposition and its opposite cannot be true at the same time. He then goes on to argue that if religions make truth claims that are contradictory, not all claims can be true. This is a condition, if it is true, that makes Hick´s pluralistic hypothesis highly implausible. Johnson also notes that, in his publications, Hick avoids answering the question of historical conflicting truth-claims. Instead Hick states that there is not enough evidence to make any conclusions about truth-claim, thus not invalidating his theory. In other words, that conflicts that cannot be settled is not a problem to the hypothesis. This, to Johnson, is a way to avoid the problem and not realise that if it is impossible to prove or falsify one belief, it does not make the contradiction less valid.

Johnson´s conclusion is that Hick´s theory does not give a solution to the conflicting truth-claims nor an explanation for the various descriptions of God in different religions. Johnson
ends his article with a statement that “even with Hick´s distinction between the Real an sich and the Real as humanly conceived, the differences between religious traditions are far too deep to render his hypothesis plausible”.\textsuperscript{107}

### 2.4.3 Hick´s response to the criticism

In his book A Christian Theology of Religions, Hick answers his critics by describing presumed dialogues between Hick and two made up characters: Phil, a philosopher, and Grace, a theologian. This dialogue continues for about 100 pages covering criticism about subjects such as: Post-modernism and other critics, and conflicting truth-claims; The Real, ineffability, and criteria; incarnation and uniqueness; salvation, mission and dialogue. Below I will give some examples of how Hick defends his hypothesis.

**About Pluralism contradicting each religion´s own self-understanding**

Phil says that according to some critics, pluralism gives a different status to different traditions than what they give to themselves; thus in itself being exclusivistic. It states, for example, that all Gods in different religions are different names of the same referent. John responds to this by stating that it is the change of status that is true and that it is a merit to pluralism.\textsuperscript{108} Further he argues that the referents are different persona or impersonae of the Real, meaning that they are not the Real in itself but human projection of it i.e in Kantian words, phenomenal manifestations of the noumental Real-in-itself.\textsuperscript{109} To this Phil states that some critics complain that Hick is using Kant´s philosophy very casually. Hick then explains that he is only using one part of Kant´s total philosophy and applies it to the epistemology of religion. Kant, according to John, had another view which is that “God is a necessary postulate of practical reason”.\textsuperscript{110} John points out that it was Kant that first made it clear that everything we experience is interpreted by our human mind. John then continues this argument to state that this is also true about our relation to the divine environment. To John, one difference is that Kant wrote about “experiencing in terms of concepts” innate to the human mind while religious concepts vary from culture to culture.

**About conflicting historical truth-claims**

John states that there are only a few conflicts of biblical history between the Abrahamic religions, such as Isaac and Ishmael regarded as forefathers of Jews and Arabs. This will,
according to John, not be a problem when Jews and Muslims realise that both traditions worship God in the same way.111 The other conflict brought up is that according to Christian tradition Jesus dies on the cross while Muslim does not believe this. John then claims that there might be writings in the Qur´an that support the Christian view meaning that this conflict might be settled. John cannot think of more instances of conflicting historical beliefs. He then states that this kind of conflict must be settled, if it can be settled, by historical evidence.

About Salvation

Grace asks John about the different ways to salvation brought up in all post-axial religions and that John claims that they all have a common soteriological structure, “they seek to be contexts of human transformation from natural self-centeredness to a new centring in the Real”.112 Does this really support the different aims within all religions in light of their deep diversity? John answers that for pluralism this is not a problem as all are forms of a generic aim to move from “a profoundly unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better state in right relationship to the ultimately Real”.113 Each religion highlights different paths to move from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness and that they are all parts of “a new centring in the Real”.114

About Plantinga

In his lecture in Teheran, Hick gives his view on Plantinga´s criticism of his hypothesis. He states that the arguments Plantinga uses, as a logician and apologist, are simple and straightforward: that all convinced they know the truth “is fully entitled dogmatically to affirm this and to affirm that all beliefs inconsistent with it are therefore mistaken”.115 A Christian exclusivist needs only to know that other religions are different and have different beliefs because a priori he knows that they are false or mistaken. This is not arrogant or imperialistic and is according to epistemological principles. Hick responds that this is a dangerous approach as it means that any group can claim that they alone know the truth and this is precisely what Plantinga´s defence for exclusivism justifies.116 Further Hick states that Plantinga´s defence of exclusivism is based on logical and epistemological permissibility

only. To Hick, this is too narrow an approach and he states that it is not possible these days to refuse to take notice of our contemporary global context and that other religions serve the same purpose as Christianity: namely to “turn human beings away from selfish self-concern to serve God”.\(^{117}\) To Hick, Plantinga does not take into account real life with all its problems and his defence is intellectual focusing on propositional beliefs only, thus not discussing salvation or moral and spiritual results of religions outside Christianity. About salvation, Hick believes that Plantinga’s position is that only God knows about salvation of the part of humanity that does not belong to Christianity. Hick ends with a question that summarises his criticism of Plantinga’s position, namely “But if only God knows, how can Plantinga, or any other exclusivist, know that his own group alone has the final and saving truth?”\(^{118}\)

### 2.5 Analysis of claims/arguments

For an argument analysis there needs to be a problem, a thesis and claims/arguments. The Problem Hick address is: “*Do we all worship the same God?*”

Hick’s hypothesis is “*All religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality*”.

How do the claims/arguments above relate to the thesis? Are they valid and how do they support (or disqualify) the thesis? I will look more closely to some of the claims/arguments to see 1) how they supports the thesis 2) if it is informative or practical 3) if it is fair - and relevant (this can include moral opinions) 4) my own evaluation.

#### 2.5.1 Hick’s claims/arguments for the hypothesis

Hick needs to go through several steps of claims/argument to build and support his thesis and I will try to put them in “a brick order” (i.e. first brick first, then second brick…).

Claim: *it is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths*. 1) The claim is necessary to be able to take a step back and look more holistically on the phenomenon of religion and is one of the foundations of the thesis. 2) It is of a practical nature, not possible to verify. 3) To me the claim is fair as this is about something that can be seen and experienced from many perspectives but none of them superior to others, Hick cannot find that comparisons of scriptures and way of living according to any of the three Abrahamic religions is superior to the others; the claim is relevant as it gives a base for Hick’s thesis by making all religions equal. 4) I support this


statement morally and intellectually as I cannot see any differences between the religions that should make one better than another.

Claim: religious knowledge is acquired by personal experiences of God and thus must be mediated through our senses and previous experiences of the world. 1) The claim supports the thesis in that we cannot experience the world as it is. We must understand it from within the context we live. 2) This claim is both informative and practical. That “religious knowledge must be acquired by personal experiences” is to me practical but the part “must be mediated through our senses and previous experience of the world” is informative as it can be verified. 3) To me the claim is logically true except for the part that refers to knowledge through personal experiences of God. It is relevant to Hick’s thesis as it gives a base for different interpretations of the same Real through cultural interpretations. Everything we experiences must be mediated through our senses and previous experiences. 4) I do not fully agree with the first part this claim. I believe that religious experience can be attained through other means than personal experience of God. It can e.g. be a process of studying holy scripts and of intellectual consideration of the world and one’s place in it. I agree with the second part about mediating through previous experiences, through our internalised beliefs, our identity. This is shown in other sciences like Social Psychology.

Claim: There is only one divine reality that is the ultimate source of all religions. 1) The claim supports the thesis as it gives a basis to understand that all Gods are different manifestations of the same real. 2) It is of a practical nature not possible to verify. 3) Is this claim fair? To some I would say yes, to others I am more doubtful. 4) This claim is, to me, very hard to comprehend. It is at the same time very attractive in its simplicity and very repellent in its complexity. The simplicity is that there is only one source of the universe instead of an (unlimited) number of creators. I cannot see a need or a reason for more than one creator. The complexity, to me, is that Hick argues that there is a creator or source of the universe, but this is not obvious to me - is there really a creator? To me it is an impossible question to answer.

Claim: direct perception of the Real is not possible for any religion. 1) This claim supports the thesis in that it gives an explanation as to why all religions do not see and worship the ultimate. 2) It is of a practical nature. 3) Is this argument fair? To some I would say yes, to others I am more doubtful. According to Hick it is not possible to perceive the Real as it is outside of human thinking and concepts and ineffable. All experiences of the Real must thus
be experienced and understood through cultural lenses. 4) To me this claim is necessary to be able to render the thesis plausible. At the same time it is like a smoke screen, hiding something you can hardly be aware of, making almost any interpretation possible.

Claim: *the Real is authentically conceived and experienced through each religious tradition.* 1) This claim supports the thesis in that it gives legitimacy to, and explains, all of today’s religions and their historical development. 2) It is of a practical nature. 3) The claim is relevant but is it fair? If there is only one divine reality, I would say that the claim is fair but it is based on the premise that the previous claims are valid. Hick states that the Real is differently manifested as it is perceived through physical filters formed by the culture a person lives in. 4) If the Real is something that is not possible to describe, it is easy to claim that the real is authentically conceived in any religion of faith. But what if the Real in reality is a conceptualisation of our urge to find meaning of life and our own existence?

Claim: *it is not possible to describe the Real.* 1) This claim supports the thesis in that it opens up for a wide understanding of the Ultimate Reality that can include all of today’s Gods and Divinities. 2) It is practical in its nature. 3) As the concept of the Real is described, i.e. that it is not possible to be perceived directly but must be mediated through our senses and that it is ineffable and outside of human concepts and thinking. I find the claim fair. 4) If you cannot describe something – how can you relate to it? I also realise that a God or the Real or the Creator or the universe must be something completely impossible for us humans to understand. We simply do not have the mental capacity to understand it (if it is an “it”). That it is not possible to describe, makes it possible to apply it to all other Gods and Divinities and thus support Hick´s thesis.

Summary: These are examples of claims Hick makes to justify his theory that we all in fact worships the same God and what makes this interpretation possible. To me, Hick has an interesting approach giving a possibility to overcome each religions claim that they are true and all other false without putting any religion at a disadvantage. The basis of his claims is that we are brought up and socialized in different cultures that colour the lenses used by all humans to interpret experiences, religions and the world. The same experience, for example, of the Real, will be interpreted differently due to these lenses. Hick´s claims are in part very convincing but in other parts rely on opinions that can be disputed. An example is that “religious knowledge must be acquired by personal experiences”. I agree with Johnson that Hick is one of the most persuasive pluralists and that he writes with precision.
2.5.2 Plantinga’s argument against

Plantinga’s criticism of Hick is different to many others as it is dealing with a defence for being an exclusivist and does not argue against Hick’s pluralist hypothesis. The subject he discusses in the article, as an exclusivist, is: “what the awareness of religious diversity means or should mean for my religious beliefs”\(^{119}\). The claims/arguments are thus more about defending and explaining the exclusivist view.

Claim: *to be an exclusivist is to believe that those believing something incompatible with my beliefs are mistaken, are in error and fail to believe in something true.* 1) If this claim is plausible, it falsifies Hick’s thesis as it does not give any possibility even to discuss or rethink the exclusivist position. 2) The claim is of practical nature as it is possible to measure. 3) The claim is logically fair. If you are an exclusivist - all others are wrong, including pluralists. 4) The way Plantinga presents this claim and his description of it is about how an exclusivist view is different to a pluralistic view and he finds that logically, there are no differences; concluding that an exclusivist can continue to be exclusivist. To me, this does not address the real problem about the different beliefs, are they correct or do they need to be reinterpreted?

Claim: *an exclusivist is not irrational nor lacks justification of his exclusivist beliefs.* 1) This is another claim in defence of the exclusivist position not directly aimed at Hick’s thesis. 2) It is practical in its nature. It is not possible to measure and Plantinga himself states that justification is an ever-changing concept. 3) The claim is logically fair. The reasoning is again, that Plantinga shows that an exclusivist is as equally rational and justified as a pluralist. 4) To me this is to discuss logic only and not deal with the problem. The conclusion can be that both exclusivists and pluralists are on the same terms justified and rational but that their beliefs are irrational and/or not justified.

Here I need to put two claims close together as they support each other and must be looked at in combination.

Claim: *for most exclusivists, an awareness of the enormous variety of human religious response serves as a defeater of the exclusivist view and a fresh or heightened awareness of the facts of religious pluralism could bring about a reappraisal of one’s religious life and exclusivist view.* 1) The two claims clearly support the exclusivist viewpoint stating that the awareness of pluralism might strengthen the exclusivist. 2) It is of practical nature. 3) The claims are relevant and fair. A heightened awareness ought to lead to a questioning of the

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exclusivist view and at the same time give a better understanding that the exclusivist view and beliefs are valid. 4) It is a real challenge to all exclusivists to learn about other religions and what they comprise. To begin with, I believe that it will strengthen the exclusivist view and not bring it in doubt as Plantinga argues. Other religions are something strange and different belonging to an outgroup and knowledge about them will only strengthen the ingroup. This might be what Plantinga wants to happen; that his religion, Christianity, will become stronger. He ends his article with this statement: “In that way knowledge of the facts of pluralism could initially serve as a defeater, but in the long run have precisely the opposite effect”. I doubt that he is right, in a longer perspective I find it more plausible that religions will become more mixed.

Summary: These claims clearly show that Plantinga uses logic to explain and defend his exclusivist view. His aim seems to be to show that, logically, an exclusivist view is on par with pluralists. To this I agree with Hick, that Plantinga is not taking into account real life with all its problems. To me Plantinga discusses from a Christian point of view only, thus leaving the other world religions out of the discussion. This is of course natural as Plantinga is a Christian exclusivist.

2.5.3 Johnson’s arguments against

Johnson’s opinion is that pluralistic theories must be “free from internal inconsistencies and accurately handle religious phenomena without distorting them”.

Out of this Johnson has two major arguments against Hick’s thesis, a) the theory has an inconsistency about conflicting truth-claim and b) that the theory is too revisionistic, thus distorting concepts in the religions.

Claim: the theory has an inconsistency about conflicting truth claims. 1) If this claim is plausible it will undermine Hick’s theory. Hick tries to avoid this problem by introducing the concept “mythological truth” and separate it from “literal truth”. 2) It is practical to its nature. 3) Is the claim fair? It is a matter of opinion. To someone that agrees with Hick’s position on conflicting truths, the argument is not fair. But to someone that questions it, it will of course be fair. 4) To me, there is an inconsistency in Hick’s theory and he tries to avoid dealing with it by referring to the lack of historical evidence and stating that some religious beliefs must be treated as mythologically true (i.e. tend to evoke a proper dispositional response).

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Claim: the theory is too revisionistic, distorting religious concepts. 1) This claim may make the theory implausible as the redefinition of concepts is too profound for all to accept. 2) It is, to some extent, informative as it can be verified by comparing concepts and interpretations between different religions. Johnson gives an example – salvation/liberation that is a very different concept in e.g. Christianity and Buddhism. 3) The claim is fair and relevant as it points to a real problem in interpretations. 4) This is an interesting point that to me is close to the concept of paradigms. As long as you follow one paradigm it is not possible to think differently, i.e. outside the boundaries, concepts and methods used in the paradigm. The claim challenges much of the religious thinking and thus of course creates a lot of resistance.

Johnson´s critique is based on some of the details (let be major details) of Hick´s thesis and tries to prove the complete thesis wrong. To me this is too simple an approach and a way for Johnson to avoid dealing with the real problem that Hick is addressing: “Do we all worship the same God?”

Summary: To me Johnson has a much to narrow approach to the problem of pluralism and on Hick´s theory. Johnson represents and organisation with the mission to spread the word of Jesus. This also characterises his way to argue against Hick´s theory as it, if Hick´s theory is plausible, would reduce the importance of the organisation Johnsons is heading. Johnson, to me, represents an exclusivist view on religions and it is not possible for him to rethink his view as seen in the statement “the theory is too revisionistic, distorting religious concepts”, that is – his perception of his, Christian, religions concepts.¹²¹

3. Possible consequences if the theory is plausible

3.1 Introduction to the situation

I will now introduce a fictional situation and look into possible consequences of the situation:

Breaking news from Reuters: Top religious leaders from the major world religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism have, during a summit in Geneva, come to the conclusion that all religions in fact worship the same God, the Ultimate Real. They also agreed that the Gods worshipped today are all true manifestations of the Ultimate Real. To celebrate this, all congregations of all faiths around the world are

encouraged to hold mass and worship together. We are all brothers and sisters in faith! This message will be repeated in other languages.

Message in Hindi: रायटर से आज की ताजा खबर: शीर्ष धार्मिक नेता...

3.2 What would be the difference from today’s situation

I believe that the immediate response among both religious leaders and single individuals would be a response of suspicion - can this really be true? - And after some contemplation a realisation that not much has changed. Each religion will continue to be the same and the personal identity would not be modified in any way, at least not in a short term perspective. In a longer perspective there will be a large change in in-groups and out-groups and how they relate to each other. This will affect a person’s identity by enhancing the understanding of what we often regard today as “the others” and in some aspects make them part of “us”. This in turn makes it necessary to find other outgroups to relate to as outgroups are essential to have an understanding of the self and the personal identity.

Hick points out that an understanding or acceptance of the pluralistic hypothesis will give a growing interaction between the religions but that each tradition will continue with its beliefs and rituals “as its own unique response to the Real”. He also believes that the rivalry between the religions will decrease and a dialogue will take place leading to change in all religions. At the same time the pluralistic hypothesis can have a major influence leading them, in time, to decrease the emphasis of aspects that imply one’s own religion’s superiority. This must be based on a shift in theological thinking that will be harder for some religions to accept than others.

Hick states that the world is in great need of this insight to calm the religious absolutism that has been used to validate and intensify numerous conflicts during the history of mankind, “there will be no true peace among the world religions without the recognition by each that the others are different but equally valid responses to the ultimate divine Reality that we call God”.

Now, one year after the statement about the Ultimate Real, there is a clear change in the intensity of conflicts around the world. People of different religions have started to attend each other’s places of worship to participate in the rituals and teaching, they are becoming

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more open to other religions and their beliefs. Individual people have started to see each other as fellow believers instead of foes trying to persuade each other that the own beliefs are superior. The world has become a safer place better provided to avoid a self-induced Armageddon that a worldwide war with use of all mass destruction weapons available would lead to.

3.3 Would it affect many and how would it affect them?
I would say that it will affect almost the entire population as, if the differences would be like I have described them, will lead to a completely different political and religious climate. In today’s society with a mixture of people of different faiths all over the world, the idea about the common Real would reach many people in a very short time. This in turn would take away the tendency to regard the own faith and morality as superior and instead give momentum to see people of other faith as equals. No more religiously justified wars and conflicts. This could also lead to another way for many to define ingroups and outgroups and thus also their identities. I hope that all this would set free a lot of energy that can be used for purposes promoting a healthy and full life for us all. Followers to all faiths and world view would be affected. In a longer perspective this would also influence the cultural lenses and make them more similar and that in turn could lead to a more common perception of God, and also of the Ultimate real.

4. Conclusion
At first glance, Hick’s hypothesis makes a lot of sense and is almost intuitive. If the universe was indeed created, why should there be more than one God creating it? To me, this is a clear indication that the pluralistic view is the best possible explanation available.

I also believe that Hick’s explanation that cultural differences have led to the religions we see today. Everything we experience must be mediated through our senses and in turn, be shaped and internalised in a specific culture and context. During history when cultures lived separated from each other, hardly knowing anything about the world outside their own culture, different religions could develop. Hick’s approach is interesting as it gives a possibility to treat all religions on par as none is morally superior and they all conceive and experience the Real authentically through their own traditions.

The two opponents I have discussed have very different views in their discussions. Plantinga concentrates on showing that an exclusivist view is as plausible as a pluralistic leading to the
conclusion that an exclusivist can continue to be an exclusivist. He do this by logically step by step go through two objections, i.e. moral objections; and epistemic (intellectual) objections, to exclusivism and show that they are not justified. All of the discussion is made within a Christian framework, thus leaving views from other world religions out. To me Plantinga does not deal with the real problem, he only argues for and defends the opinion that an exclusivist view is a proper view of religion and faith.

Johnson tries in this opposition to show that some major parts of Hick’s theory runs into difficulties to stay free from internal inconsistency and to not distort religious phenomena. This to me is a too narrow approach not dealing with the actual problem. What his opinion do it to cast shadows of doubt on parts of the theory, thus giving a reason to not to believe it at all, if one part is not plausible how can the rest of the theory be plausible? Johnson, to me, writes mostly for followers of his own organisation to give them information how to deal with questions about Hick’s theory when they are out to “spread the word of Jesus.”

When looking at the claims and arguments and Hick’s presentation of his hypothesis, I start to doubt if his reasoning is valid or not. I can clearly see that much of his thinking is based on the urgent need for humanity to stop destroying itself by e.g. religiously based conflicts. Also, I have to agree with Johnson that Hick avoids addressing the matter of conflicting truth-claims to give a credible answer; instead he introduces the concept of “mythologically true” stories. I also doubt that religious experience is acquired by personal experiences of God. To me religious experience can be attained through other means too like study of scriptures and intellectual considerations. I am ambivalent about the Real. It is easy to state that it is not possible to describe it by use of human concepts, it is ineffable. Another interpretation of the Real could be that it is a conceptualisation of the human tendency, and need, to find a meaning of life and of existence, our identity. If this is plausible it would give Hick’s theory a different interpretation, that the Real in fact is something inherent in the human beings. But the main hypothesis would still be plausible: “All religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality”,125 but with a different meaning to the concept of “ultimate reality”. Hick writes about the universal human values of justice, peace and happiness as something natural. It can be discussed if those values really are universal. Hick uses them to explain that even non-religious people like humanists and Marxists are responding to the Real: non-religious people like humanists and Marxists responds to the Real “from a religious point of view they are. They feel the presence of the Real in call of

conscience to work against,…, and to work for the creation of justice and peace on earth”.\textsuperscript{126} I doubt that this is an acceptable description to justify beliefs and actions of non-religious people.

It is also clear to me that Hick has his roots in a western society and in Christianity and that he returns to the roots in most of his reasoning. This can be seen in Appendix II and the Index in e.g. \textit{A Christian Theology of Religions}.\textsuperscript{127} This, and the lack feminist views, is to me a limitation of both the theory and its credibility/plausibility.

Beside these main objections, I regard Hick’s thesis as plausible as it gives an intuitive description and explanation of why there exist a multitude of different religions. It also gives, to me, an acceptable answer to how to relate to many creators of the universe and gives a good starting point in cross-religious discussions to overcome the differences and lack of understanding that exists today.

\textbf{4.1 Reflections}

“Who am I – what is my identity?” This question is still one of the most important in a person’s life. Hick’s theory does not change the question but may alter the answer and the personal perception of “me” as it introduces a new concept of the Ultimate Real, common to all religions. When an identity is mainly based on religion, knowledge of the concept of the Ultimate Real will make people reassess their beliefs and might lead to a change or correction of the own identity, independent of whether the concept is plausible or not. Even to non-religious people this reassessment may be facilitated when interpreting the Real as the human tendency to find meaning to life and existence.

But if the Real can be interpreted completely different, as the conceptualisation of the human tendency, and need, to find a meaning of life and of existence, our identity, is could include all types of world views and open up to an even more extensive discussion and another field for scientific research. It would be interesting to see a study made by eastern non-Christian opponent, if they exist, and his/her opinion on the theory. Would the theory be plausible from their point of view?

My own conclusion on Hick’s theory is that I regard it as a valuable contribution and a possible tool helping us to start overcoming barriers between different world views, including

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\textsuperscript{126} Hick, John: \textit{A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths}, page 80.  \\
\textsuperscript{127} Hick, John: \textit{A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths}, page 151-160.
\end{flushright}
the major religions and secular world views giving a contribution to a better world for us and coming generations.

Do we all worship the same God? A question still to be answered. Maybe Hick knows the answer from where he is now (afterlife verification).
Material / Literature


**Other references**


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