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Pluralism, exclusivism, and the theoretical virtues

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Abstract: **This paper argues that John Hick's commitment to the moral principle of altruism undermines his pluralistic claim that all of the major world religions are equally efficacious from a soteriological perspective. This argument is placed in a context of a discussion evaluating the theoretical virtues of various hypotheses about religious diversity.**

John Hick is almost certainly the most famous philosopher advocating a religious pluralist position. A major goal of this paper is to criticize a crucial moral aspect of Hick's pluralism. To set the stage for this criticism, I shall in the first major section examine a dispute between Hick and Alvin Plantinga about religious diversity. More specifically, I shall argue that these two fail to engage one another's positions fully because of a deeper undiscussed disagreement over the logical status of religious beliefs. The second, more substantial, section argues that, even if we agree with Hick's views about the logical status of various religious positions, the moral underpinning of his religious hypothesis threatens to undermine his pluralist project. By providing this context for my criticism of Hick, my hope is to offer a constructive proposal that could help to move the debate about religious diversity forward.[1]

The logical status of religious positions

As is well known, Hick argues that we should view all of the great world religions (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism) as providing equally efficacious paths to the same Real because all have an altruistic message at their core.[2] So all are 'true' in the religious sense that they provide soteriologically satisfying solutions to seditious selfishness.[3] But not all religions are 'true' in the more common propositional sense because they obviously assert

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contrary views. These conflicting claims are not a problem, according to Hick, because one need not adhere to the abstract or historical doctrines of a religion to follow its central altruistic teachings. After all, being nice to everyone does not require being right about everything. Why, then, do different religions teach such divergent doctrines if they all follow the same Real? Hick contends that people of all religions view the Real through their own peculiar cultural lenses, which are influenced by historical precedents, environmental conditions, and so on. The Real is thus constructed in the image of the particular cultures of the adherents. Moreover, no conception of the Real can even accidentally paint an accurate picture because, according to Hick, we cannot attribute any positive, substantive property to the Real. The Real is neither one nor many; it is neither personal nor non-personal. On Hick's view, in other words, while Moslems are wrong to say that Allah (the Real) is personal, they aren't any further from the truth than Hindus who claim that the Real is impersonal. Both are equally wrong; but this type of error is irrelevant because both preach the same altruistic message.

While many have embraced Hick's pluralistic vision, some, such as Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, have attacked Hick's position and defended a more exclusivistic approach. What exactly is exclusivism? In defending this view, Plantinga has offered the following definition: 'Following current practice, I shall call [exclusivism the view] … that the tenets or some of the tenets of *one* religion – Christianity, let's say – are in fact, true … [and] any propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false.'[4] This exclusivistic position obviously conflicts with Hick's denial that any religion could provide tenets that accurately describe the Real (at least in any positive way). Moreover, if the tenets of a religion made claims that entailed that not all of the great world religions are equally efficacious paths to the Real, then Hick would be opposed. Plantinga's main conclusion is that one is not necessarily in trouble, ethically or epistemically speaking, in virtue of holding an exclusivistic view. That is, Plantinga claims that holding an exclusivistic belief is not in itself immoral, unwarranted, or irrational.

As mentioned previously, the debate between these philosophers has not been as productive as one might hope. In one particular exchange, Hick has accused Plantinga of failing to address his main point; specifically, Hick writes: 'his [i.e. Plantinga's] argument does not even come within sight of the central issue'.[5] Plantinga has replied that he does not understand Hick's accusation because he thought he *had* addressed the relevant issues.[6] These philosophers are like the proverbial ships sailing past each other in the night.

So what precisely is the problem? Several years ago, before Plantinga even addressed issues of religious diversity, David Basinger presciently perceived that Plantinga's renowned Reformed epistemology (which claims, roughly, that a person can be rational or justified or warranted in accepting certain beliefs about God even without basing those beliefs on any propositional evidence) could be

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applied to the religious diversity issue. According to Basinger, such an application would address the following question:

(1) Under what conditions is an individual within her epistemic rights (is she rational) in affirming one of the many mutually exclusive religious diversity hypotheses?[7]

On the other hand, Basinger claims that Hick is addressing a different question:

(2) Given that an individual can be within her epistemic rights (can be rational) in affirming either exclusivism or pluralism, upon what basis should her actual choice be made?[8]

While Basinger fathomed the general shape of an impasse that would soon appear, his characterization turned out to be slightly off the mark. A significant feature of Plantinga's project is to deny that religious beliefs are theoretical postulates or hypotheses that provide explanations of certain data.[9] Presumably, then, Plantinga would object to any characterization of his positive position in terms of *hypotheses*, like (1). So we might more accurately phrase the key question of the Reformed approach as follows:

(1*) Under what conditions is an individual within her epistemic rights (is she rational) in affirming one of the many mutually exclusive religious diversity *beliefs*?

Curiously, though, (2) does not mention 'hypotheses' but instead neutrally invokes the pluralistic and exclusivistic *positions*. In other words, (2) is ambiguous; it could be interpreted in the following ways:

(2a) Given that an individual can be within her epistemic rights (can be rational) in affirming either exclusivistic *hypotheses* or pluralistic *hypotheses*, upon what basis should her actual choice be made?

Or,

(2b) Given that an individual can be within her epistemic rights (can be rational) in affirming either exclusivistic *beliefs* or pluralistic *beliefs*, upon what basis should her actual choice be made?

Basinger apparently means to describe Hick's approach as (2a) because of his blanket labeling of all answers to religious diversity as 'hypotheses' in (1).

Unfortunately, neither (2a) nor (2b) captures the nuances of Hick's view. For Hick treats exclusivism and pluralism as different types of positions. In Hick's own words: 'religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are of *different logical kinds* [emphasis added], the one being a self-committing affirmation of faith and the other a philosophical hypothesis'.[10] Because Plantinga would agree that exclusivism is not a philosophical hypothesis, Hick can charge that Plantinga's form

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of Christian exclusivism lacks explanatory force: 'the alternative to some kind of religious pluralism is to leave *unexplained* [emphasis added] the immensely significant fact that the other great world faiths are as epistemically well based as Christianity'.[11] In light of this distinction, we could more accurately characterize Hick's position as follows:

(2*) Given that an individual can be within her epistemic rights (can be rational) in affirming either exclusivistic *beliefs* or the pluralistic *hypothesis*, upon what basis should her actual choice be made?

Here Hick would presumably say that one's choice should be guided by which view can best explain the facts of religious diversity.

While Plantinga would most likely agree that (2*) is a worthy question to ask, he undoubtedly would find Hick's answer objectionable because, as we have seen, he rejects the view that religious beliefs should be explanatory. More strongly, if Plantinga is correct that exclusivistic religious beliefs are properly basic, then they need no positive arguments supporting them. Hick finds this stance unacceptable. Consider the subtle dig implicit in the following passage: '[Plantinga] does not offer any positive reasons for [Christian exclusivism] but thinks it sufficient to argue, negatively, that it is not morally reprehensible or epistemically out of order to adopt an exclusivist stance'.[12] Interestingly enough, even those sympathetic to Plantinga have made similar comments about his famous Reformed epistemology thesis that belief in God can be properly basic. William Alston, for example, has said:

> … Plantinga takes it to be clear on reflection, in some cases, that beliefs about God are properly basic. He acknowledges that many people disagree, but notes that we are accustomed to widespread disagreement in philosophical matters … except for negative critiques, the defence is an internal one. It consists of taking one's stand … and defying all comers to dislodge him.[13]

In fairness to Plantinga, we should note that he has recently attempted to meet such criticisms by producing two books that develop a particular theory of warrant[14] and knowledge, and then apply this epistemology to questions such as the epistemic status of belief in God.[15] Nevertheless, even here Plantinga concludes his Warrant Trilogy with the following: 'But *is* it [i.e. Christian belief] true? This is the really important question. And here we pass beyond the competence of philosophy, whose main competence in this area, is to clear away certain objections'.[16] In short, then, Plantinga is quite resistant to Hick's claim that explanatory arguments from philosophy should guide one's choice in religious matters because such arguments do not apply to (many) religious beliefs.

Religious diversity and the theoretical virtues

What can be done about such an impasse? Does it simply boil down to burden of proof shifting? Hick's daring Plantinga to explain the facts of religious

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diversity suggests that he believes that he would have the upper hand if the debate moved to a theoretical level. Let us then begin to explore the contours of the debate *if exclusivist belief*(*s*) *is considered as a theory*. As we have seen, for Hick the notion of a theory is intimately tied to the issue of explanation. That is, a theory of religion must explain certain facts about religious diversity. As Hick puts it: 'the religious pluralist does not, like the traditional religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition, but invites them to try to produce a better *explanation* [emphasis added] of the data'.[17] Unfortunately, Hick never tells us what exactly (or even approximately) he thinks that a theory is. Likewise his idea of an explanation is enigmatic at best. One of the most illustrious theories of explanation is of course the deductive-nomological model most famously associated with Carl Hempel. Clearly Hick would have trouble invoking this type of explanation because the Real would presumably need to be invoked in one of the sentences of the explanans in a way that would require it to have substantive properties (it would have to be covered by a law that related it to the explanandum). Although support for the D-N model is not nearly as strong as it once was, we should note that other explanatory models, such as Wesley Salmon's causal model, would likewise require that the Real have substantive properties (in this case causal properties). Granted, Hick explicitly claims that he is proposing a *philosophical* hypothesis, not a scientific one. But we are still left in the dark as to how a philosophical hypothesis differs from a scientific hypothesis.

Perhaps we can avoid (or reduce our need to deal with) this problem simply by asking the following question: what virtues should a trustworthy theory possess? After all, presumably there is at least some overlap between virtue-making properties in scientific and philosophical theories. To sample one famous discussion, here is what W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian say in this connection:

> Hypothesis … is a two-way street, extending back to explain the past and forward to predict the future. What we try to do in framing hypotheses is to explain some otherwise unexplained happenings by inventing a plausible description or history of relevant portions of the world. What counts in favour of a hypothesis is a question not to be lightly answered. We may note five virtues that a hypothesis may enjoy in various degrees.[18]

The five virtues to which Quine refers are as follows: conservatism, modesty, simplicity, generality, and refutability. Ernan McMullin has furnished a somewhat different list of virtues: predictive accuracy, internal coherence, external consistency, unifying power, and fertility.[19] Needless to say, Quine and McMullin are not the only philosophers to have provided a list of theoretical virtues.[20] Nevertheless, certain virtues appear (under various names) on just about every list.

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So let us begin our examination of a theoretical interpretation of exclusivism by examining how such a theory fares with respect to the virtue of *conservatism*. Quine describes this virtue thus:

> In order to explain the happenings that we are inventing it to explain, the hypothesis may have to conflict with some of our previous beliefs; but the fewer the better. Acceptance of a hypothesis is of course like acceptance of any belief in that it demands rejection of whatever conflicts with it. The less rejection of prior beliefs required, the more plausible the hypothesis – other things being equal.[21]

Most exclusivistic theories earn very high marks on these grounds. And Plantinga's position is no exception. Hick himself describes his own view as 'revolutionary' and labels those like Plantinga who defend exclusivism as 'conservative'.[22]

In this connection, consider Hick's critique of Christian inclusivism (the view that Jesus' death and resurrection opens the way to heaven so that even sincere seekers in other religions who are unaware of Christianity will still achieve salvation):

> [Christian inclusivism] is a novel and somewhat astonishing doctrine. How are we to make sense of the idea that the salvific power of the dharma taught five hundred years earlier by the Buddha is a consequence of the death of Jesus … ? Such an apparently bizarre conception should only be affirmed for some very good reason. It was certainly not taught by Jesus or his apostles. It has emerged only in the thought of twentieth century Christians … . But the theologian who undertakes to spell out this invisible causality is not to be envied. The problem is not one of logical possibility – it only takes logical agility to cope with that – but one of religious and spiritual plausibility.[23]

Note how Hick emphasizes the 'novelty' of this idea as a vice. The fact that it has emerged only recently and is not traceable to the founder(s) of the religion is assumed to count against its plausibility. If Hick is correct that one would need some very good reasons to accept Christian inclusivism in light of its apparent conflict with traditional teaching (and other problems), then presumably one could make a similar judgment about Hick's own 'revolutionary' position.

Of course it is possible that Hick is running a *reductio* here (although the passage itself gives no indication that he is offering a *reductio*). That is, he could be arguing that while inclusivists generally assume that they are traditional and conservative, they actually are not. But then we would still need a story as to why conservatism should not be considered a virtue of a philosophical theory such as exclusivism (assuming, as we are, that it is a theory).[24] Without such a story it seems that we can provisionally conclude that we have at least some reason to accept an exclusivist theory because it exemplifies the theoretical virtue of conservatism.

Even if Hick does accept conservatism as a theoretical virtue, the conservatism of exclusivism would not count for much if it entirely failed to exemplify other

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virtues. Hick calls inclusivism 'astonishing' and 'bizarre'. Presumably Hick is saying that the inclusivists' theory is incompatible, or in tension, with other beliefs that are at least as firmly established. This point draws us into a discussion of internal coherence and external consistency. One problem in discussing these two virtues is that in this case, the lines between internal and external are not well-drawn.

This demarcation problem notwithstanding, let us focus on *internal coherence*. McMullin explains this virtue in the following manner:

> The theory should hang together properly; there should be no logical inconsistencies, no unexplained coincidences. One recalls the primary motivating factor for many astronomers in abandoning Ptolemy in favour of Copernicus. There were too many features of the Ptolemaic orbits, particularly the incorporation in each of a one-year cycle and the handling of retrograde motions, that seemed to leave coincidence unexplained and thus … to appear as ad hoc.[25]

I assume that an exclusivist theory of religious diversity is internally coherent in the minimal sense that it contains no logical inconsistencies; for not even Hick charges that exclusivism is an *incoherent* theory. More broadly, there is no reason to expect that there are unexplained coincidences besetting an exclusivist theory. As we have seen, Plantinga has proffered a model according to which we can form warranted religious beliefs, including exclusivistic ones.

While the exclusivist theory displays no obvious internal incoherence, Hick's theory seems beset by incoherence at every turn. Many have pointed out, for example, that his attempt to talk of 'responding' to the Real seem to lead inevitably to attributing some positive properties to the Real.[26] To avoid rehashing some of these complicated debates, I want to concentrate on an internal incoherence that has not been much discussed in the literature (if at all). My point (to be introduced shortly) is related to, but importantly different from, a point that has already appeared. Plantinga for instance has pointed out that

> … Hick thinks not only that some [religions] *do* [transform] better than others but also that we have some idea of what they are … . But how could we have a reason to think a thing like that? If all we know about the Real is what Hick says we know, then for all we can tell God, Vishnu and the Buddha are inauthentic and it is for example, Ares, the god of war, Lucifer, and Stalin (or, for that matter, Uriah Heep or Beavis and Butthead) that are authentic *personae* of the Real … . We don't have any reason to pick and choose among them, thinking, for example, that the great world religions are where the Real manifests itself or where human beings experience it. For all we know, on this showing, it is in living like a thugee or like a member of the Ku Klux Klan that one is most authentically in touch with the Real.[27]

Plantinga correctly notes that Hick's pluralism is not as thoroughgoing as some suppose. That is, while Hick covers all of the great world religions under his pluralistic umbrella, some types of religions are still left out in the rain.

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But Plantinga's argument curiously overlooks Hick's own discussion of this selectivity.[28] Hick justifies his own preference for the great world religions in the following passage:

> But why select *these* particular traditions in the first place, rather than Satanism, Nazism, the Order of the Solar Temple, etc., as providing the right criterion? The answer arises out of the route by which the pluralistic hypothesis is arrived at … . The hypothesis … originates within a particular religious tradition – in my own case Christianity. As a Christian, then, one accepts that the sense of the presence of God within the Christian community is indeed an awareness of a divine presence; and one sees a confirmation of the *self-evidently* [emphasis added] valuable and desirable 'fruit of the Spirit' which St Paul listed as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Galatians 5.22).[29]

In this passage and elsewhere, Hick places much weight on the self-evidentness of moral principles.[30] So, contrary to what Plantinga suggests, Hick does try to provide a justification for picking and choosing among various religions on the basis of their ability to promote self-evidently correct moral principles.[31]

But Hick's commitment to accepting the major world religions and excluding some others on the basis of a self-evident moral criterion produces a serious problem. Of course, his appeal to self-evident moral principles appears innocuous as long as it is conjoined with the claim that most of the great world religions have identified, and attempt to operate in light of, these principles. Thus Hick trumpets the 'Universality of the Golden Rule',[32] and more broadly proclaims that: 'the 'fruits of the spirit' are universally recognized'.[33] If indeed everyone consented to his ethical criterion, then such widespread acceptance might provide evidence for Hick's claim that the criterion is self-evident. But we cannot take these universality claims seriously because even Hick recognizes that certain religions do not follow the Golden Rule. To be sure, Hick recognizes that 'shining threads of personal idealism, and … a genuine … spirit of service'[34] did in fact exist among those involved in even some of the ideologies he most explicitly repudiates. But he still does not grant that the movements in which they were involved are salvifically efficacious. So what becomes crucial in attaining a loftier status is that, as Hick puts it, all of the great world religions 'agree in giving a *central* … role to the unselfish regard for others'.[35]

Even with this qualification, though, Hick faces a monumental problem, one presaged at the beginning of this paper. In short, he is committed both to a broad pluralism and a self-evident ethical criterion that can undercut his pluralism. For although Hick says that the major world religions view altruism as constitutive of salvation/liberation, this is an *empirical* question and it could turn out that many religions are not so altruistic-centric. In such a situation Hick could either stick to his ethical criterion and admit that not all of the major religions measure up, which undermines his pluralism, or he can reject his 'self-evident' criterion and thus have no resources to support his rejection of 'selfish' religions. That is, his

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pluralistic commitment to the salvific efficacy of the major world religions is *settled* while his appeal to a self-evident moral principle requires him to be *open* as to what religions really are salvifically efficacious.

To better understand the depth of the problem that Hick faces, let us consider how questionable his empirical claims about the major world religions really are.[36] Many Asian traditions appear to deny that altruistic behaviour is necessary or sufficient for 'transformation'. Altruistic selflessness may be helpful from a Buddhist perspective (particularly Hīnayāna Buddhism) because it helps to extinguish desire. But altruistic selflessness is surely not sufficient for enlightenment on any Buddhist view with which I am acquainted.[37] Even more damaging to Hick's case are Sri Krishna's pronouncements about enlightenment in Hinduism's famous *Bhagavad-Gita*: 'in this world, aspirants may find enlightenment by two different paths. For the contemplative is the path of knowledge: for the active is the path of selfless action'.[38] In other words, it appears that Sri Krishna is maintaining that, for some people at least, selfless action is not necessary to find enlightenment.

This stance seems to fly in the face of Hick's reading of the universal embrace of altruism as *central* to transformation. To be sure, Hick quotes some passages from, say, Hindu texts that advocate altruism. But these texts do not show that altruistic actions are *necessary* or *central* (as opposed to being merely helpful). Moreover, Hick concedes that Buddhism (and even some forms of Hinduism) can be interpreted in such a way as to undermine its status as a salvifically efficacious religion. After all, if, as some claim, enlightenment is very difficult to achieve even for the most altruistic adherents of Buddhism, then Buddhism can be seen as 'good news for an elite few but, by contrast, bad news for the generality of the human race'.[39] To combat this elitist interpretation Hick argues that 'clearly this cannot be the original or the historically normative understanding which has made Buddhism one of the great world religions. In the course of twenty-five centuries Buddhism has imparted a positive meaning and purpose to hundreds of millions of people.'[40] Hick offers no textual or historical support for his claims. He merely asserts that such an elitist interpretation of Buddhism cannot account for its status as a 'great world religion'. But this assertion falls woefully short of supporting the strong modal claim that the elitist interpretation '*cannot*' be correct. Hick here simply seems to be begging the question. When the possibility that he must exclude a major world religion based on his ethical criterion arises, he simply imposes his ethical understanding on that tradition in a way that effectively masks the tension between his criterion and his pluralism. That is, he tries to avoid the obvious conclusion that his ethical criterion might cause him to retreat from his broad pluralism.

Now some could object that my reading is a mischaracterization of Buddhist and Hindu thought and that Hick's readings, including his ant-elitist view of Buddhism, are correct. Of course one finds so much diversity within these

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traditions that it is extremely difficult to generalize about them. Fortunately, the point that I want to make does not require the truth of my interpretation. As long as this type of interpretation is a *real* (as opposed to a merely *theoretical*) possibility, then Hick's genteel pluralism is in deep trouble. After all it ruffles few feathers to dismiss views such as Nazism as salvifically impotent. But if Hick sticks to his 'it is self-evident that altruism is the core of religion' guns, then he must be willing to bite the bullet and disqualify (major segments?) of Buddhism and Hinduism if they fail to live up to his self-evident moral standards. In allowing for this possibility, though, Hick is shooting himself in the foot by undermining his inclusiveness. Although Hick implies that all (great) world religions are equal, on closer examination it turns out that some religions are more equal than others. In short, his appeal to altruism as constitutive of religious transformation is in great tension – if not incompatible – with his desire to embrace the great world religions.

Overall, then, Hick's theory fares poorly on the internal coherence test. That is, Hick's pluralism is internally incoherent while the exclusivist theory exhibits much more internal coherence. Insofar as exclusivism displays this theoretical virtue, we have some reason to believe that it is true.

Of course, one might object that the argument up until this point only shows that an exclusivist theory is preferable to *Hick's* theory. Because there are many forms of pluralism, universalism, and so on, we need to consider their theoretical virtues before accepting exclusivism. For example, Guy Axtell has argued for a pluralism that is similar to Hick's but replaces the neo-Kantian scepticism about the Real with an epistemology akin to Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programmes.[41] Such a view could avoid the internal coherence problem mentioned above. But my goal has not been to show that exclusivism is superior to any possible competitor. Instead one of my goals is to show that we should not assume that exclusivism would fare poorly if it is considered as a hypothesis rather than a statement of faith. Moreover, because another major goal is to criticize the moral underpinnings of *Hick's* pluralism, I assume that showing that at least some forms of exclusivism are in many respects superior to Hick's pluralism even on a theoretical level is in itself a significant accomplishment insofar as Hick's views are so influential.

Some could dispute my assessment of the competition between exclusivism, considered as a hypothesis, and Hick's pluralism. After all, I have only discussed two virtues and we await Hick's possible response to this version of the internal incoherence charge. Hick, an objector may contend, is still on firm ground because he has showed that exclusivistic theories like Plantinga's suffer on the *external consistency* front. More specifically while the set of propositions comprising the exclusivistic hypothesis might be consistent, the set itself seems inconsistent with the further facts that there are so many different religions and that culture and environment plays a significant role in determining one's religious

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affiliation. And even if exclusivism is at the very least consistent with these facts, it is inadequate because it cannot explain them. This type of charge might work against Plantinga, who refrains from offering such explanations; but others have offered friendly amendments to this type of view to explain religious diversity[42] and the cultural conditioning of one's religious beliefs.[43] The debate will doubtless continue. Again, though, my aim here is more modest. Assuming that at least some exclusivistic models are conservative and internally consistent (and Hick does not dispute these claims), we have reached a tentative conclusion that we have some positive reason for thinking that they are true. Hick hopes to lure debates about religious diversity to a theoretical level to show that his pluralism is superior. But it is far from clear that debate at this level would result in a victory for Hick. Indeed, given the internal coherence problems that beset Hick at many turns, perhaps he should be careful about what types of debates he hopes to instigate. In any event, I suggest that thinking of these controversies in terms of the theoretical virtues has the potential to move the debate about religious diversity in a constructive and fruitful direction that sheds light on important issues.

Brief conclusion

To sum up briefly, I have argued that both Hick and Plantinga consider pluralism to be a philosophical hypothesis while exclusivism is, at least generally, a 'self-committing affirmation of faith'. Hick dares Plantinga and others of similar ilk to explain why there are so many different religions from this perspective. Plantinga responds by arguing that exclusivistic beliefs can be rational or warranted even if one recognizes that there are many religions. Hick does not dispute this point. He wants instead to engage in a more theoretical enterprise, one that Plantinga finds inappropriate. But we have seen that Hick should not simply assume that changing the level of debate will offer a good chance of his theory emerging victorious. Indeed, from the theoretical perspective, his theory seems to suffer from some major vices, ones from which at least some exclusivistic theories do not suffer. More specifically, his view displays a major internal incoherence because his selection of the great world religions rests on an appeal to a self-evident moral principle that, ironically, could justify rejecting some of the very religions his pluralism wants to embrace.[44]

Notes

1. Articles merely criticizing Hick are legion. While such critiques can of course be very useful, this paper not only criticizes Hick but also attempts to provide a framework that can help to direct future discussions.
2. Hick's views appear in various places. See for example his *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989). A fairly concise summary appears in John Hick 'Religious pluralism and salvation', *Faith and Philosophy*, **5** (1988), 365–377.

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3. Hick provides specific examples to support this view: 'Phenomenologically, the Buddhist experience of awakened life and the Christian experience of the new life in Christ are different … . But at the same time the two types of core experiences have very important features in common. They both hinge upon a radical shift from self-centredness to a new orientation centred in the Ultimate … . Further, the fruit of the transformed state, in its basic moral and spiritual attitudes and outlooks, is very similar. The awakened person is filled with compassion (*karuna*) and the saved person with love (*agape*) which in practice seem indistinguishable'; John Hick 'Religion as ''skilful means'': a hint from Buddhism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **30** (1991), 155.
4. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 440.
5. John Hick 'The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism', *Faith and Philosophy*, **14** (1997), 280. Hick does not just single out Plantinga on this score. He also claims that no exclusivist has properly addressed the relevant issues. He states: 'The purpose of this paper … [has been] to suggest that we do not yet have any adequate response from [Alston, Van Inwagen, Mavrodes] to the problem of religious diversity' (285).
6. See Alvin Plantinga 'Ad Hick', *Faith and Philosophy*, **14** (1997), 295–296.
7. David Basinger 'Hick's religious pluralism and ''Reformed epistemology''', *Faith and Philosophy*, **5** (1988), 427.
8. *Ibid*., 428.
9. See Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 91–92, 329–331, 371, 476–477. Plantinga summarizes his views on construing religious beliefs as hypotheses or explanations in the following passage: 'As I have argued throughout this book … it is an enormous assumption to think that belief in God or, more broadly, the larger set of Christian (or Jewish, or Muslim) beliefs of which God is a part, is … like a scientific hypothesis. Not only is this assumption enormous: it is also false. The warrant for these beliefs, if they have warrant, does not derive from the fact (if it is a fact) that they properly explain some body of data. For most believers, theistic belief is part of a larger whole … it is accepted as part of that larger whole and is not ordinarily accepted because it is an *explanation* of anything; hence its rationality or warrant, it if has some, does not depend on its nicely explaining some body of data' (477; Plantinga's emphasis).
10. John Hick 'The possibility of religious pluralism: a reply to Gavin D'Costa', *Religious Studies*, **33** (1997), 163.
11. Hick 'The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism', 279. In response to a letter from Plantinga, which asked for a specification of the main issue in the debate, Hick wrote that the main difficulty for exclusivists is: 'how to make sense of the fact that there are other great world religions, belief in whose tenets is as epistemologically well based as belief in the Christian doctrinal system, and whose moral and spiritual fruits in human lives seem to be as valuable as those of the Christian faith'; Quoted in Plantinga 'Ad Hick', 295. Note how Hick seems to think that an explanation of religious diversity is functionally equivalent to 'making sense' of religious diversity.
12. Hick 'The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism', 280.
13. William Alston *Perceiving God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 197.
14. 'Warrant' is Plantinga's stipulative term for, roughly speaking, whatever is needed to transform true belief into knowledge.
15. See Alvin Plantinga *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *idem Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and *idem Warranted Christian Belief*.
16. Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 499.
17. Hick 'The possibility of religious pluralism: a reply to Gavin D'Costa', 163. Elsewhere Hick claims that his anti-exclusivist arguments should be read as 'invitations' or 'provocations' to debate; 'The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism', 286, n. 7.
18. W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian *The Web of Belief*, 2nd edn (New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 66. Hereafter, I will attribute passages in this book only to Quine for convenience's sake (with apologies to Ullian).
19. Ernan McMullin 'Values in science', in Peter D. Asquith and Thomas Nickles (eds) *PSA 1982: Proceedings of the 1982 Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association, Volume 2* (East Lansing, MI: Philosophy of Science Association, 1983), 15–16.
20. For yet another listing, see Thomas Kuhn 'Objectivity, value-judgement, and theory-choice', in his *The Essential Tension* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 220–239. Kuhn's view of theoretical virtues appears to be different from that of either Quine or McMullin; for the latter two, if a theory possesses a sufficient number of these virtues, then the theory is likely to be true. Kuhn, on the other

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hand, does not want to claim that these virtues are epistemically important. More specifically, Kuhn is dubious about the claim that these virtues provide anyone with a *reason* for thinking that a theory that possessed them is *true*. Nevertheless, he does allow that *as a matter of fact* these virtues are of considerable importance when adjudicating among different theories or paradigms.

21. Quine *Web of Belief*, 66–67.
22. See Hick 'The epistemological challenge of religious pluralism', 285.
23. *Idem* 'Religious pluralism and salvation', 376–377.
24. William Lycan 'Plantinga and coherentisms', in Jonathan Kvanvig (ed.) *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), argues that if one accepts theoretical virtues such as 'simplicity, testability, fruitfulness, power, and the like' (6), then one must also accept conservatism as a theoretical virtue (6–7). These are deep and complicated issues of course and here I am simply assuming, along with many others, that conservatism is a theoretical virtue.
25. McMullin 'Values in science', 15.
26. As George Mavrodes 'A response to John Hick', *Faith and Philosophy*, **14** (1997), 293, points out: 'Hick's Real is not loving, not powerful, not wise, not compassionate, not gentle, not forgiving. The Real does not care about me (or anything else), and so on. The Real did not create the world, did not design the world, does not sustain the world, and will not bring the world to an end. What in the world does the Real have to do with anything which happens in the world? Why would anyone suppose that it ''accounts'' for any fact at all, religious or otherwise? Hick, I think, is himself unsatisfied with the ineffability which he professes. So he is continually drifting into causal, or quasi-causal, talk about the Real – that is the ''noumenal ground'' of certain experiences, that there is a ''transmission of information from a transcendent source to the human mind/brain'', the Real has an ''impact on us'', and so on. But this talk is either empty (though with the appearance of content) or else it violates the prohibition of applying to the Real any humanly conceivable, positive, substantial characteristics.' Other charges of incoherence can be found in, e.g. Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 49–63.
27. Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 58–59.
28. Plantinga's discussion in *Warranted Christian Belief* concentrates solely (as far as I can tell) on Hick's 1989 book *An Interpretation of Religion* and does not touch on Hick's subsequent explanations and qualifications of his pluralism.
29. Hick 'The possibility of religious pluralism: a reply to Gavin D'Costa', 164.
30. He emphasized this in a personal letter, in which he says that moral principles, unlike beliefs about the Real, are self-evidently true.
31. Of course it is an open question as to whether this manoeuvre answers Plantinga's charge that it is incoherent to talk about living a selfless life as an appropriate *response* to an *ineffable* Real. But at least Hick tries to deal with problems in this general vicinity.
32. Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 309.
33. *Ibid*., 301.
34. John Hick *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 80.
35. Hick 'Religious pluralism and salvation', 367–368.
36. Thanks to my colleague Eric Loomis for helpful discussions on these issues.
37. As I understand Buddhism, desire is the great enemy and ridding oneself of desire is the key to escaping the wheel of rebirth: 'if you fail to grasp the meaning of what you were taught, if you still continue to feel a desire to exist as an individual, then you are now doomed to again re-enter the wheel of becoming'; *Buddhist Scriptures*, selected and translated by Edward Conze (New York NY: Penguin Books, 1986), 229. Because presumably even those who generally act selflessly could still retain a desire to exist as an individual, it is clear that altruism is not sufficient for enlightenment. Generally speaking in Buddhism liberation is the combination of wisdom and merit. (Here again I am indebted to my colleague Eric Loomis for incisive comments.)
38. *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (trs) (New York NY: Mentor Books, 1972), 44. Similar ideas crop up in other Hindu texts, such as the controversial Laws of Manu: 'Austerity and sacred learning are the best means by which a *brahmin* secures supreme bliss; by austerities he destroys guilt, by sacred learning he obtains cessation of (birth and) deaths'; *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (eds) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 173 (XII.104).

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39. Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 184.
40. *Ibid.*, 185.
41. Guy Axtell 'Religious pluralism and its discontents', *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion*, **8** (2003), 49–73.
42. Kelly James Clark 'Perils of pluralism', *Faith and Philosophy*, **14** (1997), 303–320.
43. Andrew Koehl 'Reformed epistemology and diversity', *Faith and Philosophy*, **18** (2001), 168–191.
44. Thanks are due Michael Bergmann and Eric Loomis for insightful comments on previous versions of this paper. A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Philosophy of Religion in Hilton Head, South Carolina (February 2005). I am grateful to my commentator, D. Z. Phillips, and the members of the audience for instructive comments. Finally, I am indebted to the University of South Alabama for reassigned time that allowed me to work on this paper.

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