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# Problems in the Philosophy of Religion

Critical Studies of the Work of  
John Hick

*Edited by*

Harold Hewitt, Jr

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## Critical Response

### From Philosophy of Religion to History of Religion

CARL W. ERNST

The evolution of John Hick's thinking on religion testifies to a remarkable opening-up of the philosophy of religion toward the phenomena offered by the comparative study of religion, or history of religion. From its inception in the European Enlightenment, the modern philosophy of religion occasionally made bows in the directions of non-Christian religions, but philosophers from Hume and Kant onward tended to use such data only as part of a larger project, which was a rational critique of Christianity, mainly the Protestant variety. The philosophy of religion, relying exclusively on the concept of autonomous reason as a standard, treated thinkers from the Catholic tradition primarily in terms of logical consistency, and rarely let them off easily. More exotic doctrines were for the most part consigned to a kind of limbo or to places even more unkind.

The struggle to formulate a philosophy of religious pluralism, as we see it in the work of John Hick, or in that of theologians such as Hans Küng, is the sign of a major intellectual shift in the post-colonial era. I think Professor Gillis is right to warn us not to underestimate the difficulty of this transition, both in theological and in political terms. On the intellectual side, there are many substantive and methodological questions to be faced. One of these is the question of how philosophy of religion is to absorb the materials offered by the history of religion, and how it will itself be changed in the process. The following remarks are some suggestions from the viewpoint of a historian of religion, occasioned by Gillis's lucid critical review of Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*.

At its worst, philosophy of religion's approach to the history of religion can be characterized as plunder. The theorist swoops down, snatches a likely-looking bauble, and carries it home gleefully to add to the collection. Various reconditte terms from

Chinese, Algonquin or Arabic then eventually find their way to the open market, where eventually even freshmen will bandy them about. What is objected to here is not so much popularization, but the reductionist and tendentious use of religious symbolism and doctrine out of context. Such was the case in the *chinoiserie* fad in the eighteenth century, when Leibniz and Voltaire imagined Confucius as an enlightened deist. Twentieth-century philosophers have been considerably more subtle, but not much more successful. It is doubtful, for instance, that Karl Jaspers' friendly but superficial reflection on the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna will be long remembered. The main problem with these philosophical raids outside European territory is that they do not lead to any fundamental rethinking of the categories and methods of European rationalism. If the philosophy of religion aspires to go beyond a Eurocentric parochialism, it will be necessary to enlarge not only the scope of the religious data that are to be considered, but also the very concept of reason itself.

It is very encouraging to find that John Hick has recognized the new task facing the philosophy of religion, which he describes thus: "A philosopher of religion must today take account not only of the thought and experience of the tradition within which he or she happens to work, but in principle of the religious experience and thought of the whole human race."<sup>1</sup> The potential burden imposed by this opening-up of the field to the entirety of human history is indeed vast, oppressively so. It is to Hick's great credit that for years he has actively and systematically engaged in the study of the panoply of world religions and in dialogue with representatives of different faiths. While no one can attempt to know all areas of religious history thoroughly, unless one makes a sustained effort as Hick has done, there is little hope of going beyond provincialism. Again, I do not underestimate the political difficulty of this task; as Chester Gillis observes, "much is invested in the current paradigm, and many will not surrender that investment easily or be coerced to surrender it on rational grounds".<sup>2</sup> Yet we are now offered a historically unparalleled opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the human religious universe, and I hope that Hick's example will stimulate others to continue in this effort.

The enlargement of the scope of philosophy of religion thus calls for an engagement with the various scriptural traditions (in the broadest sense, including oral as well as written traditions). The

theorist needs to confront the manifold formulations in which the saints, prophets and buddhas of the world have expressed their experiences, and then imaginatively re-experience them.<sup>3</sup> It will not do if we simply accept the abstract textbook summaries of the world religions, which typically reduce religious teachings to simplified dogma or formula for action; we must think with the traditions, and see how the scriptural mandates are carried through historically, how the spirit of the law is conveyed and understood in society. For instance, in the question raised by Gillis of justice as a problem in cross-cultural ethics, if we push for a deeper understanding of political culture in the different religious traditions, the results will be more satisfactory than if we glance at them with the preconceptions of modern Western rationalism.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in looking at the Qur'anic punishment of amputating a thief's hand, it is important to recognize that Qur'anic demands for mercy make poverty an acceptable excuse for the crime.<sup>5</sup> The Hindu concept of *karma*, which to the Western mind may suggest a cynical justification of the *status quo*, is tempered with the ethical demands of *dharma* as a hierarchically ramified religious law.<sup>6</sup> The Buddhist tradition, far from lacking a concept of justice, conceives of the just ruler as implementing the ideal of the Buddha before his renunciation.<sup>7</sup> The apparently irrational excesses of the Iranian revolution need to be seen as the violent secularization of Shi'i authoritarianism through anti-colonial nationalism. And so on. It is not simply a question of "What sort of justice?"; in my view, it is a question of how our concept of justice may be extended by the history of religion.

As far as the concept of reason is concerned, I find myself in general agreement with Gillis's criticisms of Hick for conceding ground to positivism, for a reductive attitude toward myth, and for insufficiently dealing with issues of hermeneutics and the ambiguities within the various traditions. Yet I would go further in questioning the rationalist presuppositions that continue to direct phases of the inquiry. A doctrinal understanding of religion has dominated Christian theology ever since the term "religion" was adopted; Augustine's definition of religion as the acknowledgement, with piety, of God as the creator helped set in motion the perennial Western concept of a doctrinal and credal structuring of the relation between the human and the divine.<sup>8</sup>

The centrality of this rationalistic emphasis in Christian theology and, later, the European Enlightenment, is nearly unparal-

leled in other religious traditions. Thus Hick treats faith as primarily a cognitive issue, and describes religion's confrontation with naturalistic ideologies as a factual one subject to experiential verification. His argument then leads to the statement that, for those who participate in religious experience, "it is rational to believe in the reality of God".<sup>9</sup> I would suggest that this is to put the cart before the horse. Religious experience is fundamental; symbols, formulations, and doctrines are elaborated on the basis of experience.<sup>10</sup> The very origin of the concept of experience in Western thought attests to a struggle against dogmatism, whether religious, philosophical or scientific. In religion, it was primarily the Protestant reformers who invoked religious experience against the authority and doctrine of the Catholic Church, and this non-doctrinal usage continued down to William James's use of the term in his classic study.<sup>11</sup> In the scientific field, along with Baconianism, alchemy was another source of our concept of experience in its struggle against Aristotelian orthodoxy; alchemy, of course, had religious implications as well. Here I would like to invoke an image from a seventeenth-century alchemical text, which allegorically depicts Experience as the Queen of Heaven before whom Philosophy bows down and worships.<sup>12</sup> So, with apologies to Philo, I would like to suggest that we think of philosophy as the handmaid of experience in the new context that we face today.

Faith needs rational justification only for those to whom reason is supreme. Philosophy can articulate through reason the fundamental experiences that have given the spiritual bases of the religious traditions. And reason itself, as articulated in ancient and medieval Western philosophy, was far more existential than its current reduction to propositional logic would allow. Rethinking the relationship of the Enlightenment to the rest of world history, and working through the scriptures and their philosophical interpreters from a global perspective, will give us a better foundation for describing the relationship between the intellect and the Real.<sup>13</sup>

The philosophy of religion has run a course from the beginnings of the Enlightenment to the post-modern age. It now has to break out of the self-imposed boundaries of the Eurocentric colonial period. The history of religion has much to offer to philosophers of religion as they rethink their task in the light of the world's religious traditions. The precise shape of a future philosophy of

religion that is based on a global awareness of religious experience is something that we can not yet discern. Yet we can be sure that the pioneering work of John Hick will stand as an important step in this enterprise.

## NOTES

1. *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. xii.
2. Chester Gillis, above, p. 42.
3. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952) p. 64.
4. As Hick points out, the democratic concept of political equality has nothing to do with any of the world religions, but is an outcome of "the development of western science-based civilization" (*Interpretation of Religion*, p. 328).
5. Marshal G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, 1: The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p. 336ff.
6. Ariel Glucklich, *Religious Jurisprudence in the Dharmasāstra* (New York: Macmillan, 1988) p. 39ff.
7. Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965) *passim*.
8. Augustine, *On True Religion*, in *Earlier Writings*, tr. John H. S. Burleigh, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) p. 218ff.
9. *Interpretation of Religion*, p. 211.
10. I have argued the primacy of religious experience over language in the case of Islamic mysticism in "Mystical Language and the Teaching Context in the Early Sufi Lexicons", in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
11. H. Pinard, "La théorie de l'expérience religieuse. Son évolution, de Luther à W. James", *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, xvii (1921) 63-83, 306-48, 547-74.
12. "There with arose Philosophy as one filled with grace, / Whose looks did shew that she had byne in some Heavenly place; / For oft she wipt her Eyes, / And oft she bowd her knees. / And oft she kist the Steps with dread, / Whereon Experience did tread; / And oft she cast her Head on high / And oft full low she cast her Eye / Experience for to espy, " - "Experience and Philosophy", in Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968) p. 341.
13. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, SUNY Series in Systematic Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), is an example of this kind of philosophizing.

## Reply

JOHN HICK

Chester Gillis is a generous critic, both here and in his book *A Question of Final Truth*. Indeed, the fact that he sees so much to approve in the development of the *Interpretation of Religion* (IR) hypothesis gives added weight to his various points of criticism. Let me therefore turn immediately to those.

1 Gillis thinks that continued concern with the questions raised by the logical positivists two generations ago should long since have been abandoned; and many others would agree with him. However, it seems to me that discrimination is called for here. The logical-positivist movement is long dead, and it would be anachronistic to address in its terms the issues with which it was concerned. But some of those issues themselves are not dead. The basic empiricist principle that to exist is to make an in-principle experienceable difference was sound before positivism came on the scene and is still sound after it has departed. And its application to religion is inevitable. Hence the entirely proper question: what in-principle experienceable difference does it make whether or not God exists? If it makes no difference within actual or possible human experience (other than in our purely subjective states of mind) whether God exists, does it not follow that "God exists" is, for us human beings, factually empty, or pointless, or meaningless? (A like question can also be posed in non-theistic religious terms.) Does not this constitute a fundamental challenge to a realist use of religious language? And how is the challenge to be met, if not in terms of the contrasting accounts of the structure or character of the universe as religiously and as naturalistically understood; and of the consequent differences made within actual or possible human experience, according as one or the other of these understandings turns out to be basically correct? I should be more impressed by those who urge the abandonment of the idea of "eschatological verification" if they were to offer some alternative solution to the valid question which it seeks to answer.

Let me at this point respond also to Carl Ernst, with the thrust of whose remarks I wholly agree. As will be evident from *An*

*Interpretation of Religion*, I base religious belief emphatically in religious experience. As a Western philosopher I argue, in the empiricist mode, for the rationality of basing our beliefs upon our experience, including religious experience. This seems to me to be a legitimate and, indeed, in our Western society, a necessary exercise. But I join Ernst in hoping for a much greater openness on the part of Western philosophers of religion to the data of religion around the world.

2. Gillis gives an accurate summary of my concept of mythological truth as the practical truthfulness of stories and ideas that tend to evoke dispositional responses which are appropriate to the ultimate subject matter of the myth. Thus, for example, to picture the Real as a heavenly father who loves us tends to evoke an answering love, both upwards and also towards our neighbours, which is appropriate given the "cosmic optimism" of the great traditions. Gillis regards this as a non-cognitive account of myth. He is correct if he simply means that myth, so understood, does not make literally true propositional assertions. But, on the other hand, myth can be importantly truthful in orienting us rightly in relation to reality. In contrast to this, is not a purely propositional conception of truth excessively narrow and too much a function of Western rationalist modes of thought?

3. Gillis asks, "Could not the Real disclose itself in a definitive revelation?"<sup>1</sup> Such a question infringes the terms of the IR hypothesis in that it attributes the human concept of intentionality to that which lies beyond the scope of all such concepts. But, if we were to accept the question, the answer would presumably be "Yes, this is theoretically possible." What Gillis has in mind is, of course, that such a definitive revelation occurred in Jesus Christ, so that the Christian religion is the locus of final truth. But this is where we came in! Christians have traditionally made that claim; and Jews and Muslims and, in their different way, Buddhists and Hindus have made similar claims on behalf of their own religions. Hence the world-wide situation of conflicting claims to unique superiority that provokes the line of thought leading to the pluralistic hypothesis. It follows from that hypothesis that we must, within each tradition, learn to transcend our inherited claim to unique superiority and make whatever developments of our belief-systems this suggests.

I have to agree with Gillis that such a development will not be easy within Christianity. It may well even have to wait, as he hints, for a new generation of intellectual leadership. In the meantime, however, there is a growing movement in this direction. But Gillis is right again in pointing to the ecclesiastical-political pressures, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church today, against "a pluralistic understanding of religion that ascribes salvific parity to the great world religions".<sup>2</sup> I am aware of these ecclesiastical pressures even as a Protestant; but I am conscious that they are much more powerful and threatening for a Catholic. It requires not only courage but also a certain independent standing in the theological world to be able to resist such pressures. I have sympathy with those Catholic theologians who are able publicly to espouse religious pluralism, and sympathy also with those who might wish to do so but for whom this is not politically feasible. It is enough for the present that, if thought on these issues is moving in the right direction, it will eventually bear good fruit.

## NOTES

1. Chester Gillis, above, p. 40.
2. Gillis, above, p. 42.