**Editorial: “Controversial but Never Ignored”—John Hick and Vito Mancuso**

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In this issue, we publish accounts of the work of two controversial figures in contemporary philosophy of religion, one from the UK, the other from Italy.

Thomas William Ruston’s article, ‘The John Hick Papers: Religious Pluralism in the Archives’, is a unique and important work of scholarship, which provides the first systematic description of the contents of the archived papers of the British philosopher of religion, John Hick (1922–2012).

Philosophy does not take place in a vacuum. It is fed and influenced, not only by the wider intellectual, social, and political context of the thinker but also by his or her individual life experiences. Noting the impact of the philosopher’s temperament on the character (so to speak) of their philosophy, William James wrote that “The books of all the great philosophers are like so many [women and] men.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, is it possible to read Schopenhauer and imagine him jubilant, or to read Leibniz and imagine him in despair?

Throughout his excellent article, whose structure and methodology are inspired by advice left in the archives by Hick himself, Ruston sensitively illuminates the relationships between Hick’s life and thought. It begins to seem inevitable, in the light of Ruston’s work, that Hick’s temperament and varied experiences should have ramified through his philosophy—from the ineffable experience on the top deck of a bus in Hull, through his 22nd birthday spent in mortal danger on a troop ship in World War II and his 1962 “trial for heresy” by the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, to his public critique in 1996 by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger).

It will be clear, even from this brief *précis*, that controversy was never far behind Hick: the early episode with the Presbyterian Church in the USA, which concerned his beliefs about the Virgin Birth of Jesus, was even reported in the *New York Times*.[[2]](#footnote-2) But of particular interest is Ruston’s description of Pope Benedict’s critique of Hick’s religious pluralism and the philosophical reasons behind their difference of opinion.

Citing, among other sources, a ‘limp red notebook’ written by an eighteen-year-old Hick, Ruston demonstrates Hick’s consistent interest in, and commitment to, the notion of divine ineffability since at least 1940. Drawing on letters between Hick and Peter Heath, he traces Hick’s source for the idea back to Spinoza: for Hick, the word ‘God’ properly evokes an ineffable reality, which transcends all human categories and of which, therefore, nothing significant can be thought or literally said. In a passage from a letter in the archives cited by Ruston, Heath acknowledges that this idea could open up a philosophical route to religious pluralism, but expresses a fear that it will never gain widespread acceptance in theological circles. Perhaps with the Ratzinger controversy in mind, he also states his concern that Hick’s notion of ineffability could cause an ‘outcry’ against him.

Hick often calls this ultimate divine reality the ‘Real’ or the ‘transcategorial’, as in his important 2002 paper on ineffability.[[3]](#footnote-3) He draws a Kantian distinction between the (noumenal) Real as it is in itself, as opposed to its (phenomenal) appearances in different human cultures and religions. From this, he concludes a principle of equal validity between the world religions: the idea “that human religious experience is a range of responses to a transcendent reality, taken together with the observation that the moral and spiritual fruits of the different world faiths are, so far as far as we can tell, equally valuable”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Pope Benedict’s complaint was that Hick’s concept of ineffability ruled out the exclusive truth of any human representation of the divine. But, as Ruston shows, Hick thought that this simply follows from the view of divine ineffability that had been affirmed by mainstream, ‘orthodox’ theologians, including Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Aquinas, as well as pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who (after the 15th or 16th century), occupied a more ambiguous relationship to the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy.

While we might object, on philosophical grounds, to both the neo-Kantian way in which Hick applies the concept of ineffability in philosophy of religion and the form of religious pluralism that this entails,[[5]](#footnote-5) the story told by Ruston’s article is most instructive. For it shows how little has changed regarding ineffability (and its logical implications for theology) since the ancient world. Despite its persistent centrality to Christianity (especially the apophatic tradition), it has always struggled to gain mainstream acceptance. As the Polish philosopher, Leszek Kołakowski explains, regarding pseudo-Dionysius:

if the author of *On Divine Names* had not been mistaken for centuries for whom be pretended to be—the first Bishop of Athens converted by St Paul (Acts, 17.54)—he most probably would not have got away with his brazen neo-Platonism and his work would would have remained in the annals of Christian though[t] as a heretical freak.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In his article introducing Vito Mancuso to an English-speaking readership, Corneliu C. Simuț presents us with a contemporary Italian statement of a similarly controversial idea that has, likewise, been surfacing and resurfacing within religious thought for many centuries: that “the metaphysical God of traditional theology…does not exist”.[[7]](#footnote-7) This idea, which is today often called ‘the critique of ontotheology’, is motivated by the aim of preserving divine holiness by refusing to place God on the same ontological level as mere entities. It is regarded as the main logical consequence of the notion of divine ineffability, which, as Anthony Kenny points out, has been repeatedly affirmed by “theologians of unquestioned devoutness”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Paul Tillich,[[9]](#footnote-9) Simone Weil,[[10]](#footnote-10) and John Macquarrie[[11]](#footnote-11) (as well as pseudo-Dionysius,[[12]](#footnote-12) and Meister Eckhart)[[13]](#footnote-13) have all insisted that, if we are to think of God as the explanation of everything that exists (and of the meaning of existence itself), we cannot also think of him as one of the things that exist—a thought which would introduce circular reasoning into the theological explanation. Simuț’s article informs us that Vito Mancuso shares with Hick an association with controversy. But, on this point, he is repeating an idea that not only follows from the orthodox notion of divine ineffability, but was also designed to guard against the conceptual idolatry of mistaking God for a mere thing.

The two contemporary philosophers of religion that we meet in this issue share the quality of being, in Simuț’s words, “controversial…, but never ignored”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Since one of Mancuso’s books has sold over 100,000 copies, it is a quality that we may envy them.

1. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Hick, *John Hick: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Hick, ‘Ineffability’, *Religious Studies* 36 (2002): 25–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hick, ‘Ineffability’, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Guy Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 26–7; ‘Divine Ineffability’, *Philosophy Compass* 10/7 (2015): 489–500, on 495–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Leszek Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See p. 000, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anthony Kenny, ‘Worshipping an Unknown God’, *Ratio* 19 (2006): 441–453, on 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Welwyn: James Nisbet & Co., 1968), vol. 1, 227, 262–3, 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rowan Williams, ‘Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-Existence of God’, in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London: SCM, 2007), 203–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity In Search of Deity: An Essay in Dialectical Theism (The Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St Andrews in Session 1983–4)* (London: SCM, 1984),186. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *The Divine Names* 588b cf. Plato, *Republic* 509b. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: An Introduction to the Study of his Works with an Anthology of his Sermons*, ed. & trans. J. M. Clark (London: Nelson, 1957), 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See p. 000, n. 15, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)