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Religious Pluralisms: From Homogenization to Radicality

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Abstract Among the philosophical and theological responses to the phenomenon of religious diversity, religious pluralism has been both prominent and influential. Of its various proponents, John Hick and John Cobb represent two important figures whose respective positions, especially that of Hick, have done much to shape the debate over religious pluralism. This article critically analyses their positions, arguing that, by unhelpfully homogenizing religious perspectives, each of them fails to do justice to the radical diversity that exists. As an alternative to these homogenizing tendencies, the article builds upon D. Z. Phillips' contemplative conception of philosophy to develop a radical pluralist approach, which prioritizes a deepening of understanding of religious diversity rather than the promotion of one's own theological preferences.

Keywords Religious diversity · Religious pluralism · John Hick · John Cobb · D. Z. Phillips · Radical pluralism · Contemplative philosophy of religion

Few would deny that religious diversity is an obvious fact. There are, and have been throughout history, numerous religions, and so too are there many people who do not follow any religion. This situation generates a multiplicity of worldviews and forms of life, at least many of which appear to be in tension with one another. How should philosophers of religion respond to this situation?

Various responses are evident in the literature. Some of these derive from thinkers who are more commonly identified as theologians than as philosophers, but the disciplinary boundaries are fluid in this discursive area. A well-known threefold typology of theoretical positions is that which comprises exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Initially devised by Alan Race in the early 1980s,[1] the typology has

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[1] See esp. Race (1993 [1983]).

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been enthusiastically endorsed and appropriated by many participants in the debate, albeit not by all.[2] Entering into the dispute over the viability of the typology is beyond the scope of this article; rather, my purpose here will be to critically examine the notion of religious pluralism in particular. The latter, as we shall see, is itself a variegated position, or cluster of positions. Indeed, there have now been too many versions of religious pluralism proposed by philosophers and theologians for them all to be surveyed in a single article.[3] I shall thus be selective in my focus, though not arbitrarily so. My principal exemplars of religious pluralism will be the respective variants proposed by two authors who have both been recognized as making significant and influential contributions to the debate, namely John Hick and John Cobb.

My procedure will be to begin with Hick, who from the 1980s until his death in 2012 became 'the most widely known pluralist' (Hedges 2010: 115), the locus classicus of his 'pluralistic hypothesis' being his ambitious work, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (2004; first edition, 1989), based on his 1986–1987 Gifford Lectures. Though much admired and celebrated, this work, and Hick's pluralist position more generally, have been the target of extensive criticism. My own appraisal, too, will be largely critical, my main complaint being that, despite styling itself as pluralistic, Hick's position really amounts to a highly reductive and homogenizing account of religion. Far from doing justice to the genuine diversity that has characterized human forms of religiosity throughout history and across the world, Hick's theory proposes that 'all the great traditions' pursue the same ethical ideal and are directed towards a single metaphysical principle, which Hick designates as 'the Real.' Those forms of religion that diverge from this normative paradigm are relegated to the subordinate category that Hick variously terms 'pre-axial', 'primal', 'archaic' or 'tribal' religion, instances of which may possess 'some dim sense of the Real' but have yet to evolve to the heights of 'developed monotheism' (2004: 275 n. 2). A consequence of this homogenization of the 'great traditions', combined with a hasty and condescending dismissal of smaller religions, is that what began by claiming to be an interpretation of religion in general ends up being, at best, a one-sided distortion.

My second exemplar, John Cobb, has himself been critical of Hick's brand of pluralism. Rather than supposing all religions—or, at any rate, all the 'great' ones—to be promoting the same values and revering (albeit indirectly) the same metaphysical reality, Cobb is willing to admit that there are 'ontologically distinct' realities towards which different religions are directed (e.g. Cobb 1993). His position has been dubbed 'complementary pluralism' because he regards the claims of diverse religions as, on the whole, 'complementary rather than contradictory' (Cobb 1990b: 14; see also Griffin 2005a). Thus, like Hick, he sees no ultimate incompatibility between the major religions; but unlike Hick, Cobb wishes to distance himself from any suggestion that those religions have 'a common characteristic' underlying them (Cobb 1990a: 81). The compatibility and complementarity, Cobb maintains, are found not in commonality or sameness, but in dialogue and the potential for mutual 'creative transformation'.[4] However, despite Cobb's sometimes referring to his

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[2] For objections to the typology, see D'Costa (1996). For a defence, see Schmidt-Leukel (2005).

[3] As D'Costa aptly puts it, '"pluralism" is Hydra-like in its growth' (2016: 137). For a variety of perspectives, see Knitter (2005).

[4] Cobb borrows the term 'creative transformation' from Wieman (1946: 58–66) and says it can be used interchangeably with 'the creative event' (Cobb 2002: 194 n. 5).

position as 'radical pluralism' (1990a: 88, 92), I shall argue that it ends up becoming another form of homogenization. This is because, while recognizing some degree of current diversity, he nevertheless adopts a limiting threefold categorization of religions, which labels them as 'cosmic', 'acosmic' or 'theistic' depending on their conception of divinity (Cobb 1993). Moreover, the transformation that Cobb wishes to promote consists in 'a movement towards greater resemblance' (1999: 59), his own theological ideal being a global religious convergence in which diversity is diminished.

What we see, then, both in Hick's religious pluralism and in Cobb's complementary or purportedly 'radical' pluralism, are two varieties of homogenization. While Hick affirms that 'all the great traditions' already share a nexus of common values and are, despite their apparent theological differences, really directed towards the same metaphysical 'Real', Cobb maintains that, despite current theological variability, the traditions have the potential for theological convergence and that this should be advanced through dialogue and 'inward appropriation of other traditions' (1975: 60). We might, therefore, call Hick's position *actual* religious homogenization and Cobb's *aspirational* religious homogenization. In both cases, there is a tendency to restrict the scope of the inquiry to only a limited pool of religious traditions and to only a limited sample of phenomena within those traditions, doing so in order to avoid awkward cases that conflict with the thesis being advocated.

Some may contend that Hick and Cobb are outdated figures and that the debate over religious pluralism has moved on since their most seminal contributions were made. This contention is true in one respect but false in another. It is true inasmuch as other advocates of religious pluralism have indeed propounded claims and theories in the years subsequent to the publication of the major works of Hick and Cobb, and critics of religious pluralism have raised pertinent objections. But it is false inasmuch as the respective positions most prolifically and robustly advanced by Hick and Cobb continue to reverberate through the debate. In the case of Hick, for example, it remains his version of religious pluralism that is cited as 'the most well-known and influential pluralist theory within philosophy of religion to date' (Harrison 2015: 260). So too is Hick the principal reference point for most of those who wish to develop a version of religious pluralism of their own. For example, in a recent book based on his own Gifford Lectures of 2015, Perry Schmidt-Leukel frames his pluralist project in relation to Hick's recommendation that adherents of the world's 'great traditions' ought to consider the need to revise their own doctrines in response to their increasing awareness of other religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2017: 31). Endorsing this recommendation, Schmidt-Leukel seeks to promote the growth of 'an interreligious consensus' that might emerge 'from within each of the religions in religion-specific ways' (2017: 112). While this is, then, at least an embellishment of Hick's ideas, the sort of project epitomized by Schmidt-Leukel remains tied to the ideal of an ever-burgeoning homogenization of religions—in the direction of 'a synthesis' (e.g. 2017: 148, 154, 161). The proposal that the synthesis occur 'in religion-specific ways' accords closely with Cobb's vision of convergence by means of appropriation: each religion begins from its own starting point, but the overall trajectory is towards sameness and the dissolving of particularities. What we see, then, in recent espousals of religious pluralism generally amounts not to a significant revision or transcendence of the actual homogenization of Hick or the aspirational homogenization of Cobb, but rather a continuation or inflection

of one or other of those approaches, or a combination of the two, as in the case of Schmidt-Leukel.[5]

In contrast with the homogenizing versions of religious pluralism to which I have just referred, I shall propose a different approach—one that, as D. Z. Phillips has put it, seeks to recognize 'the radical pluralism of human life' (Phillips 2007b: 205). We could thus call it simply a radical pluralist approach—or a contemplative radical pluralism, following Phillips' recommendation of a 'contemplative conception of philosophy' more broadly.[6] Unlike Cobb's, this approach is radical in the sense that it eschews any particular theological agenda. For this reason, it selects its examples not for the purpose of emphasizing either existing or potential resemblances between religious traditions, but rather to bring out the genuine diversity within and between religions as well as between religious and nonreligious perspectives. Instead of presuming that religions are, or must be, ultimately compatible with one another, radical pluralism of the sort that I wish to commend 'allows the hubbub of voices and their diverse relations to each other to be themselves' (Phillips 2007b: 205). In some instances, coming to see the diversity more clearly may highlight ways in which disputes could be resolved, but it may just as readily reveal that the disputes are liable to be irresolvable. The point of the approach is neither to settle nor to aggravate disputes, but rather to deepen our understanding of the particularities of religious and nonreligious forms of life in a way that remains undistorted by prior theological motivations. In a single article such as this, it will not be possible to provide a fully worked-out defence of the radically pluralist approach being proposed.[7] Indeed, it is not being claimed that this is the only viable way to go on in the philosophy of religious diversity. But what I seek to do in the article is place a contemplative radical pluralism firmly on the table as an approach that prioritizes doing justice to the diversity as opposed to vindicating any particular theological agenda.

Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis

John Hick was a pioneer in the philosophy of religion who was one of the first to take seriously the need for philosophical scrutiny of (in principle) 'the religious experience and thought of the whole human race' (2004: xiii). Unlike philosophers who pay lip service to the desirability of cross-cultural understanding but then politely excuse themselves from making the effort, Hick devotes sustained attention to non-Abrahamic religious and philosophical traditions, especially Buddhism and Vedāntic Hinduism, in several of his works.[8] With regard to the issue of religious diversity, Hick's name is strongly associated with the position known as religious pluralism,

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[5] A notable exception is Victoria Harrison, who, in several publications has sought to develop a theory that she calls *internalist pluralism*, which owes more to her reading of Hilary Putnam than to either Hick or Cobb (see esp. Harrison 2006, 2008, 2012). Harrison's theory has not, however, received much attention, whether favourable or critical, thus far. I have written my own critical appraisal of it in an article that is currently under review.

[6] See, e.g. Phillips (1999, 2001); Burley (2012, 2015).

[7] The present article is part of a larger project that will, in due course, include a monograph that develops and exemplifies the approach more comprehensively.

[8] See esp. Hick (1976, chapters 16–19; 1993, Part III and passim).

which he advanced in the form of what he terms 'the pluralistic hypothesis'. This is the hypothesis that 'the great world faiths' (or 'great world traditions') 'constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human', and moreover, that each of these traditions provides a means for transforming 'human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness' (2004: 240, 376). Thus, we see that the hypothesis comprises both a metaphysical and an attitudinal or ethical dimension: it contends that there is a metaphysical something, 'the Real', towards which all the 'great' religions are directed, and that the ethical attitudes and behaviour of religious adherents are able to be moved along a path of increasing selflessness through participation in the religious life.

Despite calling it merely a hypothesis, Hick evidently considered the hypothesis to be true. Yet his overall argument for its truth is easy neither to discern nor to summarize, not least because much of it relies heavily on ideas from the epistemology of Immanuel Kant while, at the same time, drastically and self-consciously revising those ideas. The principal Kantian 'insight' that Hick appropriates consists in the thesis that rather than passively perceiving the world as it is 'in itself' (*an sich*), we, by means of our cognitive apparatus, play an active part in constructing how the world appears to us, and hence that a fundamental distinction must be made between things as they merely appear and things as they really are in themselves.[9] Hick is not, for his purposes, particularly interested in the implications of this thesis for our understanding of our everyday experience of the spatiotemporal world. Instead, he wishes to transpose the thesis into the domain of religious experience while also augmenting it by adding the contention that a person's cultural background affects his or her modes of cognition in the religious case. What we end up with, then, is a distinction between the object of religious experience as it is in itself and that same object as it appears to those who encounter it experientially. It is the former that Hick calls 'the Real', whereas the latter—the Real as it appears (or 'manifests') to religious experiencers—takes as many forms as there are religious conceptions of either a personal deity or an impersonal absolute. To say that Hick provides an argument, either in support of the general Kantian view of ordinary experience or in support of his extension of that view to the religious sphere, would require an exceptionally capacious understanding of what counts as an argument. What Hick really gives us is an exposition of the Kantian view followed by an affirmation of the plausibility of extending and modifying it. It is as though Hick, by putting forward his hypothesis, imagines himself to have argued for its veracity.

The ethical dimension of his pluralism emerges out of a perceived need on Hick's part to find a criterion by means of which to distinguish an 'authentic' from an 'inauthentic' 'manifestation of the Real' (2004: xxvi, 338 and passim). His view is that since only authentic or truthful manifestations will possess salvific or liberative efficacy, the authenticity of a given tradition's conception of divinity (or, in the case of a nontheistic religion, its conception of some other esteemed principle) is indicated by the 'soteriological effectiveness' of the tradition in question (2004: 248, 373). Soteriological effectiveness, according to Hick, is disclosed by the extent to which the tradition promotes a certain set of ethical values, which Hick generally lists as comprising such qualities as 'generosity, forgiveness, kindness, love, compassion' (2004: 314). These,

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[9] See esp. Hick (2004: 240–246); cf. Kant (1998 [1787]: B69).

Hick proposes, are 'epitomised in the Golden Rule', some rendition of which is taught in the scriptures of 'all the great traditions' (316). Their progressive embodiment in a religious believer's life is what, on Hick's account, constitutes a transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.

Hick's evaluative procedure is thus to seek out pronouncements of something approximating the Golden Rule in the primary textual sources associated with the traditions in which he is interested, while downplaying the presence of counterexamples. Having found a suitable number of instances, he then declares it to be the case that 'all the great traditions' do indeed champion this ethical ideal and that any tradition espousing values incompatible with it ought to be rejected as morally deficient along with any conception of the divine to which the tradition in question subscribes (Hick 2004: 311, 339).

These central components of Hick's position—notably the unargued-for postulation of a single metaphysical 'Real' behind the diverse conceptions of divinity affirmed by the major religious traditions, along with the demarcation of 'authentic' from 'inauthentic' religions on the basis of a particular 'ethical ideal'—have implications for the study of religious diversity that are both reductive and homogenizing. I shall elaborate some of the important implications in the following section.

Reductive and Homogenizing Implications of Hick's Approach

Of the various objections that could be raised to Hick's position, here I shall focus on the following three. First, I shall point out how Hick's binary distinction between 'the great traditions' on the one hand, and all the rest on the other, impedes a well-rounded and suitably nuanced comprehension of religious diversity. Second, I shall argue that Hick's instrumental or pragmatic conception of religious doctrine is a distraction from the task of understanding the doctrines themselves and the roles that they have in the religious forms of life at issue. And third, I shall contend that Hick's ethical criterion for distinguishing authentic from inauthentic religions encourages a distortedly narrow appreciation of the forms that religious life can take. In short, then, I shall argue that Hick's position, far from enabling a full recognition of religious diversity, in fact engenders a reductive and homogenized picture.[10]

In distinguishing 'the great traditions' from those that are not so great Hick draws heavily upon the theory of an 'Axial Age' or 'Axial Period' first proposed by Karl Jaspers (see Jaspers 1953).[11] Jaspers had differentiated between 'Pre-Axial cultures'

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[10] My own criticisms bear some resemblance to those of others. Heim (1995), for example, argues that Hick's position amounts to a form of 'friendly reductionism'—in contrast with the hostile reductionism of antireligious naturalism—because it assumes there to be one true religious reality behind all the individual religions' respective conceptions of it (see esp. Heim 1995: 30). Unlike Heim, however, my critical perspective is not tied to the theological goal of making room for a plurality of conceptions of 'salvation' in particular. Though there is not space to argue the point here, a radical pluralist approach would be wary of privileging the striving for salvation over the multiple other dimensions of religious life, as doing so is liable to divert attention away not only from those other dimensions but also from the many religious traditions to which the concept of salvation has no obvious application (such as many of the small-scale or indigenous traditions that Hick and others routinely sideline).

[11] Jaspers cites certain intellectual forerunners such as von Lasaulx (1956) and von Strauss (1870), but it was Jaspers himself who coined the term 'Axial Period' (*die Achsenzeit*). For critical appraisal of the whole notion of an axial period, see recent review publications by Tsonis (2012, 2014).

and those that emerged during the axial period. The former, which include 'Babylon, Egypt, the Indus valley and the aboriginal culture of China', despite having possibly 'been magnificent in their own way', nevertheless 'appear in some manner unawakened' in comparison with the axial cultures, which arose during the first millennium BCE primarily in China, India, Iran, Palestine and Greece (Jaspers 1953: 2, 6–7; cf. Eisenstadt 1986). According to Jaspers' thesis, failure to undergo the spiritual and intellectual transformations characteristic of the axial period is indicative of a people's 'primitive' and 'unhistorical' stage of development; upon coming into contact with axial civilizations, such peoples tend to either die out or be assimilated into the new, properly historical climate (Jaspers 1953: 7–8).

Hick appropriates Jaspers' conception of a transnational axial awakening in order to distinguish between two types of religion, which he often calls 'pre-axial' and 'post-axial' respectively—though he also uses terms such as 'primal' and 'archaic' interchangeably with 'pre-axial' and equates 'post-axial religion' with 'the great world traditions'. Following Jaspers, Hick associates pre-axial religion with the absence of a concern for individual salvation; instead, this type of religion strives merely to keep 'communal life on an even keel' (Hick 1995: 109; see also, inter alia, 2004: 12, 23, 28). [12] Post-axial religion, by contrast, is 'concerned with salvation/liberation as the realisation of a limitlessly better possibility' (2004: 12). As with Jaspers' use of this vocabulary, Hick's talk of pre- and post-axial religion has more than merely chronological implications. The contention is not that axial or post-axial religion universally replaced that which preceded it, for pre-axial religion has purportedly continued to exist up to the present day, albeit only in relatively small pockets. Hick's deployment of the distinction is one of the principal means by which he separates the type of religion in which his pluralist project is interested from that which falls outside the project's remit, excusing his relative lack of attention to 'archaic' or 'primal' religion by noting that his aim has not been to devise a definitive theory (2004: xiii; see also 1990: 3).

Although, as Hick rightly observes, it would be impossible for any single project to be fully comprehensive in its treatment of forms of human religiosity, it is for this very reason that any attempt to provide an interpretation of religion tout court needs to proceed with caution. The interpretation that Hick offers us, however, is one that treats as normative for religion in general a set of dominant religious traditions, narrowly construed in terms of a simplified and largely decontextualized nexus of ethical factors, while excluding from its purview the multifarious small-scale or indigenous traditions that have been a pervasive presence throughout history. The inevitable result is an unduly homogenized and one-sided picture of religion.

With regard to Hick's treatment of religious doctrine in particular, this may be objected to on the grounds that it reduces doctrine to something purely functional, where the function in question is itself understood in narrow ethical terms. Hick's reason for interpreting religious doctrine, and indeed religion simpliciter, in functional (or instrumental or pragmatic) terms is that he needed to find some way of accounting for the obvious doctrinal divergences between different religious traditions. If all the 'great' religions are equivalent inasmuch as they are directed towards the Real, why, we might ask, do they profess discrepant teachings? For Hick, the solution is to claim that

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[12] Cf. Jaspers (1953: 12): 'They also have in common a magical religion destitute of philosophical enlightenment, devoid of any quest for salvation...'.

the discrepancies are merely at the level of myth: the religions communicate their teachings through diverse mythologies, but the mythologies are all 'true' in a functional or pragmatic sense insofar as they advance the transformation of religious practitioners' lives from self-centredness to Reality-centredness (see, e.g. Hick 2004: 375).

A problem with this kind of functional analysis is not only that it misrepresents the practitioners' relationship to the doctrines they espouse, but that it also homogenizes doctrine by compressing it all into a single 'mythic' mould. Mythology is in fact a broad and variegated phenomenon that is capable of fulfilling multiple purposes in relation to religious traditions. For example, the epic tales of Rāma and Sītā in Hindu mythology may be utilized to, among other things, provide part of the narrative backdrop to the annual Diwali festival, epitomize a vision of the victory of righteousness over evil, depict an ideal of uxorial loyalty, and vindicate Hindu nationalist claims that India is a Hindu nation. But our understanding of such myths is hampered rather than enhanced by collapsing all forms of religious doctrine into a single category and by reducing the functions of myth to that of expediting the transformation from self- to Reality-centredness. In place of Hick's homogenizing account, what is needed is a nuanced analysis that recognizes the multiple roles of doctrine in the lives of religious believers. These roles, as Paul Griffiths has usefully articulated, include providing community rules and defining community boundaries; expressing and informing spiritual experience; forming members of the community through imbuing them with a catechism; and enunciating propositions that aid soteriological development, not merely by recommending particular modes of action but also by making 'claims about the nature of human persons and the world in which they live' (Griffiths 1990: 167). In short, doctrines are constitutive of the very worldview within which a religion has the sense that it does. It is thus unlikely to be interpretively illuminating to presuppose that doctrinal differences between religions amount merely to variations on a common ethically inflected theme.

Finally, in this critical appraisal of Hick's style of religious pluralism, I should reiterate the reductive implications of Hick's privileging of the capacity to foster a certain mode of ethical 'transformation' as the principal criterion of a religion's authenticity. When considering the issue of whether religion can be defined, Hick is favourable towards a 'family resemblance' account of the concept of religion, according to which the correct application of the term 'religion' does not depend on there being any single property or set of properties that everything we call religions have in common: it is enough that these things exhibit 'a network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing like the resemblances and differences… among the members of a natural family' (Hick 2004: 4).[13] In the light of such a flexible and expansive account, Hick is able to admit that traditions as diverse as Christianity, Theravāda Buddhism and the ancient worship of Moloch (which purportedly involved human sacrifice) are all religions (2004: 5). When it comes to distinguishing between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' religions, however, Hick's family resemblance principle goes out the window. It get replaced by the essentializing and narrowly prescriptive 'ethical criterion' that Hick claims to find in the scriptures of 'all the great traditions'.

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[13] Hick is here explicitly paraphrasing Wittgenstein (1953: §66). See also Hick (1990: 2–3).

As noted in the previous section, Hick's procedure for arriving at his ethical criterion is to inspect scriptural sources associated with the religions in which he is interested and to select key passages expressive of what he identifies as the 'Golden Rule'—roughly, the principle that one ought to treat others as one would wish to be treated oneself. While admitting that even the 'great world traditions' have been sources of suffering and conflict as well as of healing and beneficence (Hick 2004: 337), Hick is quick to regard this as merely an indication that, in practice, the adherents of the religions have not lived up to the ideal that is common to all of them. When expounding the modes of action and forms of life enjoined by the traditions in question, it is as though Hick has already decided in advance what is to count as properly ethical, and it is this a priori decision that determines which textual passages are to be treated as normative for each tradition as a whole—and indeed for the traditions considered collectively. Thus, for example, with reference to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Hick quotes a 'description of the good person' in which characteristics such as generosity, honesty, gentleness, compassion, humility and forbearance are praised (Hick 2004: 317, citing *Bhagavad Gītā* 16.1–3). What Hick does not pause to mention is the overall context of the quoted passage, located within a dialogue between the warrior-prince Arjuna and the divine incarnation, Lord Kṛṣṇa, in which Kṛṣṇa is ostensibly seeking to convince Arjuna that the right course of action is that of fulfilling his warrior duty by entering resolutely into an internecine battle that, as Arjuna recognizes, threatens to tear the society apart. The deep ethical ambivalence and complexity of the text, and the multiple interpretations and appropriations to which it is amenable, are set aside in Hick's eagerness to find fodder to support a general thesis about an ethical ideal allegedly shared by all the great traditions.

With regard to doctrines that, on a natural interpretation, come into conflict with the ethical ideal in question, Hick's strategy is to treat them as aberrations that ought to be amended or expunged through a process of critical purification internal to the traditions concerned. To illustrate his point, Hick cites examples such as the Judaic doctrine that Israel is God's chosen people, the Islamic conception of *jihād* as a holy war against infidels, the doctrine of double predestination in its Augustinian and Calvinist forms, and the version of the doctrine of karma that maintains that a person's present disadvantages are natural repercussions of sins committed in a former life (2004: 339–340). Disapproving of all these doctrines, Hick recommends that they be reformed to enable the respective traditions to more consistently embody the ethical ideal that they all, according to Hick, espouse; for it is by embodying that ideal that the religions bring themselves into 'alignment with the Real' (2004: xxiii, xxiv and passim). Regardless of the extent to which one might concur with Hick's own moral preferences, a consequence of this privileging of a certain evaluative agenda is that the intricacies and particularities of diverse religious traditions are glossed over. Some religions are summarily precluded from the inquiry on the grounds that their respective conceptions of the divine 'are clearly morally defective' (2004: 339), while those religions that are deemed worthy of consideration are shoehorned into a constricted ethical framework. Once again, the inevitable result is far from an enriched understanding of religious diversity. On the contrary, what we get is a homogenized and sanitized caricature of diversity, with any incongruities demoted to the status of anomalies that require cleansing through doctrinal reform. In view of this consequence, we might follow Gavin D'Costa in

characterizing the sort of pluralistic hypothesis offered by Hick as being itself a kind of mythology.[14]

Cobb's Vision of Creative Transformation

John Cobb has characterized his own position as one that, 'for the sake of a fuller and more genuine pluralism' (Cobb 1990a: 81), rejects what often goes by the name 'pluralism,' including the type advocated by Hick. In expounding the difference between the sort of pluralism to which Cobb is opposed and the sort that he commends, David Ray Griffin refers to the former as 'identist' and to the latter as 'differential' or 'complementary' pluralism (Griffin 2005b: 24).[15] Here, 'identist' means something close to what I have been meaning by 'homogenizing'. Identist pluralism homogenizes in both an ontological and a soteriological sense: by maintaining that 'all religions are oriented toward the same religious object' and that they all 'promote essentially the same end (the same type of "salvation")', it really constitutes only a kind of 'pseudo-' or 'superficial' pluralism (Griffin 2005b: 24, 29; cf. Heim 1995: 7). Differential pluralism, meanwhile, accepts that religions favour different salvific ends and allows for the possibility that they are 'oriented towards different religious objects' (Griffin 2005b: 24).

Borrowing concepts from John Hutchison, Cobb draws a threefold distinction between 'theistic, cosmic, and acosmic' religions (Cobb 1993: 78),[16] proposing that each of these is typified by a different mode of religious experience through which a distinct object is encountered. Though tempted to regard these objects as together constituting 'a plurality of "ultimate realities"', Cobb opts instead to refer to them as three 'aspects' or 'features' of reality (1993: 79–80, 81). His contention is that while cosmic reality is a multiplicity of entities, acosmic reality is the 'common ground or source' of that multiplicity, and theistic reality, or God, is 'a Worldsoul'—'the unity of experience that contains all the multiplicity of events and interacts with them' (80). Thus, Cobb distinguishes his own position from that of Hick by claiming that Hick's account ultimately falsifies all religions whereas his own account allows 'that all may be correct in their fundamental positive beliefs, even if they are often wrong in their negations of others' (81). In other words, while it follows from Hick's account that any religion that treats its own conception of the divine as absolutely true is in fact mistaken because the Real is beyond the power of human conceptualization, on Cobb's account there is room for different conceptions of the divine to all be true: given that reality possesses cosmic, acosmic and theistic features, religions that accept one or other of

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[14] 'Since "pluralistic theology" ironically often seems to hinder rather than aid a proper recognition of religious plurality, despite its literal intention, it seemed appropriate to deem it mythical' (D'Costa 1990: xi). Compare Heim's characterization of Hick's pluralism as a specifically modern and western 'mythos' that, rather than promoting an appreciation of the diversity of existing religions, in fact enters into competition with them (Heim 1995: 214).

[15] A comparable distinction is made by Schmidt-Leukel between 'monocentric' and 'polycentric' pluralism (Schmidt-Leukel 2017: 29), though Schmidt-Leukel does not attach to 'monocentric' the pejorative associations that Griffin attaches to 'identist'

[16] Cf. Hutchison (1991: 15–18), who uses the terms 'cosmic', 'acosmic' and 'historical'.

these characterizations are mistaken only insofar as they suppose the other characterizations to be false.

We might wonder, however, about the extent to which Cobb's account is really doing justice to the traditions concerned. The schema of cosmic, acosmic and theistic types is, at best, a starting point for a more refined analysis of the specificities of particular religions. It risks getting in the way of that analysis if distinct forms of religion are forced into the same category without further qualification. With regard to the category of acosmic conceptions of reality, for example, Cobb treats this as encompassing such contextually heterogeneous notions as Paul Tillich's sense of God as 'being itself',[17] Advaita Vedānta's 'Brahman without attributes' (*nirguṇa brahman*), the ultimate 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*) of all things propounded by Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the 'creativity' proposed by Alfred North Whitehead (see, e.g. Cobb 1993: 80, 82; Griffin 2005a: 49).[18] Considered at a high level of abstraction, there are no doubt affinities between these notions, but to avoid the danger of the label 'acosmic' obscuring more than it illuminates, one would need also to give close attention to the contexts in which these notions are articulated. In some cases, one would need in particular to examine places where advocates of one of these notions have tried vigorously to differentiate it from another, such as is the case with disagreements between Advaita Vedāntins and Mahāyāna Buddhists (see Ingalls 1954, Biderman 1978, Whaling 1979). Upon examining these debates, one sees that they hinge as much upon sectarian rivalries and adherence to particular doctrinal lineages as they do upon technical philosophical exposition of the concepts of Brahman and emptiness. It is these broader parameters of the disputes that are liable to be lost sight of when traditions such as Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism are lumped together in the same 'acosmic' religious category.

We should also not overlook the significant shift from understanding and interpretation to revision and imposition that occurs when a commentator such as Cobb declares that the religions he is discussing have failed to see that their own conception of reality is merely partial. When Cobb recommends, for instance, that the Holy Trinity of Christianity, Allah of Islam, the God of Israel, and so on, be reconceptualized as a 'Worldsoul', and that this be understood as 'the unity of experience that contains all the multiplicity of events and interacts with them' (1993: 80), his proposal is no less revisionary than is Hick's contention that all the great traditions are really, regardless of their own self-conceptions, oriented towards a 'transcategorial Real'.[19] Just as Hick does violence to the concepts of (for example) Allah and *śūnyatā* when he imagines that these could usefully be thought of as 'manifestations' of the same transcendent reality, so Cobb does comparable violence to these concepts when he asserts that it would be mistaken to regard them as mutually incompatible. While it would, no doubt, be possible to find a place for aspects of both Islam and Mahāyāna Buddhism in a single religious life, it is unlikely that doing so would leave intact the worldviews of each, including the concepts of Allah and *śūnyatā*. It is said of Mohandas Gandhi that when asked whether he was a Hindu, he replied that he was, but that he was 'also a

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[17] See, e.g., Tillich (1951: 235).

[18] For some critical discussion, see Schmidt-Leukel (2017: 238–239, esp. 239 fn. 86).

[19] For 'transcategorial Real' or 'transcategorial reality', see for example Hick (2010 [2001]: 76–89; 2004: xx–xxxiii). In the epilogue to his autobiography, Hick includes 'transcategorial Real' among the 'new but now familiar concepts' that he introduced into philosophy of religion (Hick 2002: 320).

Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, and a Jew' (DuBois 2014: 153). Such a reply enunciates a religious possibility, but not without challenging the self-understandings of members of these various religious communities: the reply is spoken from a specific polemical standpoint. The presumption that Abrahamic monotheism is compatible with the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness seriously underplays the extent to which religious worldviews are often defined as much by what they exclude as by what they encompass. On this matter, we should again take notice of remarks about religious doctrine made by Griffiths (1990), to which I referred in the previous section.

In short, then, it is evident that, in common with Hick, Cobb's main interest is not in the rigorous explication of religious worldviews and forms of life. Instead, he is intent on promoting a particular theological agenda, one which encourages interreligious dialogue in the hope of engendering mutual 'creative transformation.' Speaking explicitly from what he regards as a Christian point of view, Cobb seeks to transform Christianity through the selective appropriation of elements from other religions. The aspects of religion into which he enquires are selected not for their intrinsic interest or because they promise to expand our appreciation of religious diversity, but rather on the grounds that they may have something of value to contribute towards Christianity's self-improvement. As Cobb puts it in a book exploring Christian–Buddhist dialogue, 'The research into the traditions which the dialogue should stimulate will be for the sake of participating more effectively in the present engagement' (Cobb 1982: xi). Elsewhere, Cobb urges his fellow Christians to appropriate and interiorize imagery from Asian traditions, such as the *yin* and *yang* symbolism of Chinese Daoism, to help 'purify the Christian imagination of the divine from its masculine sexism' (1975: 264). Recognizing, however, that the Daoist imagery itself may not be immune from bias in its gendered associations, Cobb regards it as an advantage that these associations will be unknown to many Christians; such ignorance enables the images 'to be appropriated in abstraction from their full connotations in their own traditions' (264). Not only, then, is careful contextualized analysis of religious phenomena not the primary goal: such analysis can in some instances be detrimental to Cobb's real purpose, which is to expedite the formation of a 'global theology'—a progressive convergence in which Christianity and other religions evolve 'towards greater resemblance' (1999: 59).

From Homogeneity to Radical Plurality

The desire for greater religious resemblance, and hence greater homogeneity, of the sort that Cobb advocates is itself a religious preference. As such, we might, when speaking for ourselves, feel sympathetic or antipathetic towards that preference, but neither these feelings nor the preference itself has anything to do with developing a deeper understanding of religious diversity as it obtains in the world around us. Similarly, in the case of Hick's 'hypothesis' pertaining to a mysterious 'Real' that no one can experience or conceptualize directly and yet which is somehow 'manifested' in the religious visions of 'all the great traditions': this hypothesis is itself the expression of a religious or theological impulse—a yearning for harmonization between religions—that, ironically, characterizes all existing religions as deluded despite their ethical merits.

Thus, in the case of both the formulations of religious pluralism that we have considered so far, what purports to involve the recognition of religious diversity is really a highly selective defence of a personal theology. In each case, ethical criteria are deployed in order to differentiate the category of acceptable forms of religiosity from those that are deemed to be beyond the pale. For both Hick and Cobb, the criteria of appraisal are ones upon which, they assume, representatives of all the major religions would concur. Hick, as we have seen, privileges the Golden Rule; Cobb, similarly, maintains that teachings inciting destructive behaviour towards a religion's own members or towards others 'would count against it' (Cobb 1993: 83). Rather than striving to enrich our comprehension of the diversity of religious ethics by deliberately seeking out instances of 'destructive' religions, the approaches pursued by Hick and Cobb eschew such broad-ranging enquiry. Owing to the specific theological aspirations guiding these approaches, the religious outlooks judged to be unethical are thereby also excluded from further investigation.

Cobb, for instance, dismisses the Ku Klux Klan on the grounds that its members display insufficient 'wisdom and integrity' for there to be anything that we could learn from such a movement (Cobb 1982: x). The 'we' to whom Cobb refers are his fellow Christians, and the learning that he wishes to nurture is that which would contribute to moral and spiritual growth. Hick does something similar in his treatment of Aum Shinrikyō, the religious group that gained notoriety in 1995 when it claimed responsibility for a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Instead of pausing to consider what we might learn about the violent and apocalyptic dimensions of religion from studying groups of this sort, Hick appeals to his criterion of 'love and compassion' to assert that the groups in question 'fail spectacularly under this criterion' (Hick 2004: xxvi). By failing in this respect, they fail also to be deemed worthy of further attention.[20]

It is precisely the kind of narrow religious agenda pursued by Hick and Cobb—and by many others involved in debates over religious diversity—that hampers opportunities to study what D. Z. Phillips terms 'the radical pluralism of human life' (Phillips 2007b: 205). If enlarging our understanding is to be prioritized above insulating our minds from the specimens of religion of which we morally disapprove, we shall have to look beyond the putative religious pluralisms so far discussed. We might, for example, usefully contrast the rapid dismissals of the Ku Klux Klan and Aum Shinrikyō noted above with the more reflective approach exemplified in work by the sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire. Recognizing that there are destructive as well as creative spiritualities and that religious practices can just as readily serve to stimulate hatred and hostility as to nurture love and compassion, McGuire (drawing on Kertzer 1988: 15) describes a Ku Klux Klan initiation ceremony by calling attention to the formidable corporeality of the group marching and to the imposing imagery of hundreds of hooded Klansmen, some carrying large flaming crosses (McGuire 2008: 116–117). Inevitably, care is needed not to give the impression that values and practices are being endorsed when rituals such as these are described, but the task of understanding what it is about the groups concerned that some find attractive is unlikely to be assisted by allowing one's moral uneasiness to dictate the description. Although McGuire is writing as a sociologist rather than as a philosopher, her method of describing and elucidating what

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[20] For a more thoroughgoing and insightful treatment of Aum Shinrikyō (from a religious studies perspective), see Reader (2000).

Phillips would call 'possibilities of sense' within the ritual is one from which philosophers of religion would do well to learn.[21] For even if one's conception of philosophy is of a discipline inextricably committed to the evaluation of values and truth claims, meticulous attention to the phenomena themselves will invariably be required—if only as a precondition of the evaluative enterprise.

Phillips' own formulation of radical pluralism emerges from his 'contemplative conception of philosophy' (2007b: 197; cf. 1999). From this point of view, philosophy's task is not to advocate particular ethical, religious or political preferences, but rather, having been inspired by a sense of 'wonder at the world in all its variety' (Phillips 2001: 325), to contemplate and seek to do 'conceptual justice' to that variety (2007c: 167). A radical pluralist approach to religious diversity is thus one that contemplates, investigates and endeavours to elucidate the diversity without allowing one's own evaluative judgements about the content of the religious, and indeed nonreligious, viewpoints to colour or distort one's exposition and analysis. In response to questions about whether such a disinterested stance is practically achievable, the radical pluralist might answer that, regardless of its achievability, the disinterested stance is worth striving for; it is by striving to achieve it that we ensure that we avoid as far as is possible the biased and largely unilluminating approaches typified by Hick and Cobb. In the remainder of this article, I outline some characteristics of pursuing a radical pluralist approach to religious diversity. A full defence of the approach—as one viable approach to the philosophical study of religious diversity—would require elaborate analysis of specific examples, for it is in the illumination provided by such analyses that the fruits of a philosophical approach are known. In the space available here, however, the task of explicating what the approach consists in may be advanced by means of concise examples that explicitly contrast with the approaches examined earlier in this article.

A Radical Pluralist Approach to Religious Diversity

Of the various characteristics of a radical pluralist approach that could in principle be highlighted, I shall here focus on three that are most central. First is a commitment to attend to particularities rather than to assume that religions must be slotted into some neat typological schema. Of course, similarities and affinities between religions should not be ignored where they exist; but if the religions being analysed turn out to have ragged edges, then, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, 'What's ragged should be left ragged' (1998: 51).[22] Second, instead of applying moral criteria in order to evaluate conceptions of divinity, the radical pluralist looks to see the sense that such conceptions have in the lives of those who articulate them, whether through worship and reverence or through rebellion. If talk of 'authenticity' has a place in the investigation, it is as an object of study rather than as a mode of philosophical appraisal. Third, in an effort to develop an expanded conception of religious possibilities, the radical pluralist actively seeks out counterexamples to the kinds of generalizations that other philosophers of

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[21] For Phillips' use of phrases such as 'possibilities of sense' and 'possibilities of meaning', see among other places Phillips (2001: 5, 17, 30, 33 and passim).
[22] The phrase is one to which Phillips was fond of alluding; see, e.g. Phillips (1975: 156; 1988: 219).

religion have been known to make. Thus, for instance, in response to claims to the effect that love and compassion constitute the 'ethical ideal' that is 'common to all the great traditions' (Hick 2004: 14), the radical pluralist will look to see whether, beyond facile interpretations of deliberately selected scriptural passages, a more complicated picture may be discerned. I shall now elaborate these three aspects of a radical pluralist approach below, contrasting them with the other approaches already discussed.

We have seen how both Hick and Cobb operate with broad-brushed typologies that risk getting in the way of attention to particular features of the phenomena at issue. Hick's typological distinction between 'pre-axial' and 'post-axial' religion is based on presuppositions about, on the one hand, the antiquity and homogeneity of what are these days generally referred to as indigenous religions, and on the other hand the internal consistency and collective cohesiveness of what Hick calls 'the great traditions'. Without denying that some religions are older or more populous than others, the radical pluralist that I am envisaging would aim to give due attention to the variations not only between but also within each of the categories cited by Hick. Hinduism provides an instructive example in this context. There are, for instance, questions to be raised about the formation of the concept of this religion, not the least of which concerns whether Hinduism is well characterized as a single religion at all or whether it is more aptly thought of as a cluster of more or less distinct but overlapping religions.[23] Arguments bearing upon this matter have been advanced from many perspectives, and the ongoing debate has done much to destabilize widespread assumptions about not only Hinduism itself but also the conceptual category of religion more generally. One among several strands of the debate concerns the antiquity that can be claimed for Hinduism, given that what is commonly regarded as Hinduism today owes much to developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the influence of European Indological studies, British colonialism, Hindu reform movements and campaigns for Indian independence (King 1999). Combined with the porosity of the boundary between Hinduism and Ādivāsī (indigenous or 'tribal') religions in India (Carrin 2012), these factors go a long way towards undermining the applicability to this case of simplistic dichotomies such as that between 'pre-' and 'post-axial' religion. Without necessarily trying to resolve the debate over the nature and origins of Hinduism, a radical pluralist approach would seek to recognize the complexity of these issues, such recognition being a vital prerequisite for appreciating the diversity within what has come to be known as Hinduism in the modern world. Although Hinduism is in some respects a peculiar case, comparable complications arise in relation to other religions.[24]

With regard to Cobb's threefold distinction between cosmic, acosmic and theistic religions, the radical pluralist would again wish to question how helpful this is as a means of understanding religious diversity. Rather than defining these categories in abstraction from the particularities of religions and then trying to fit religions into the categories, a radical pluralist approach would involve asking how, if at all, the categories are articulated in the lives of religious believers. Cobb offers a suggestion that could help one to begin that task: he mentions that the Indian intellectual and guru

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[23] See, e.g. several of the essays in Sontheimer and Kulke (1997) and in Llewellyn (2005).
[24] For discussion of issues relating to the concept of Buddhism in the modern world, for example, see Almond (1988) and McMahan (2008).

known as Sri Aurobindo claimed to have undergone 'mystical experiences supportive of all three types of religious tradition' (Cobb 1993: 79).[25] While Cobb is quick to treat this as evidence in support of his own theological contention that ultimate reality comprises all three features, the radical pluralist would wish to examine the details. Aurobindo's accounts of his experiences may indeed present us with religious possibilities: by indicating how alternative conceptions of reality can have a place within a single religious life, they show us what 'reality' means for Aurobindo. But they do not tell us what reality must consist in independently of the form of religious life in question. If the study of reports of mystical experiences teaches us anything, it is that such reports come in many varieties. Cobb finds those of Aurobindo agreeable in the light of his own theological predilections. A radical pluralist approach would contemplate the variety within and between mystical traditions, analysing differences as well as similarities in order to deepen our understanding of the diversity.

On the matter of evaluating conceptions of divinity by reference to moral criteria, we have seen Hick rejecting certain conceptions on the grounds that they 'are clearly morally defective' (2004: 339). He cites in particular 'images of a blood-thirsty super-power who demands human and animal sacrifices, or of a tribal or national deity who favours one section of the human community at the expense of others' (339). Earlier in the same book, Hick remarks that important differences between our own (modern, western) society and those in which human sacrifice was practised include our improved comprehension of natural processes and our enlarged 'moral vision' (311). While there are indeed important differences between the societies in question, Hick's pointedly disparaging way of making the comparison tells us more about his own attitudes than about the kinds of religious practices at issue. Instead of writing off conceptions of ferocious deities and rituals involving blood sacrifice as 'morally defective', a radical pluralist approach would look for descriptions of these practices that help us to build up a picture of their role and meaning in the lives of those who perform them. As in the case of McGuire's attentiveness to the visceral dimensions of a Ku Klux Klan ritual, philosophers of religion might productively draw upon ethnographic accounts that furnish contextualized 'thick descriptions', including descriptions that evocatively capture elements of the affective atmosphere surrounding the ritual in addition to reporting the basic sequence of events.[26] Although there are few, if any, societies that regularly perform religious human sacrifice these days, animal offerings continue to be widespread. By studying their contexts, and the varying reactions exhibited by the people involved, we may come to see aspects of religious diversity to which the kinds of project typified by Hick and Cobb prematurely close the door.[27] It is the effort to deepen our understanding even in spite of any personal moral objections we might have to the practices concerned that, as Phillips and Peter Winch have emphasized, makes moral or ethical demands of the inquirer (Phillips 2007a: 38; 2007b: 208; Winch 1996: 173).

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[25] See also Griffin (2001: 279; 2005a: 50 n. 41), who cites the discussion of Aurobindo's experiences in Simmons (1981, 1984).

[26] For discussion of thick description in relation to philosophy of religion, see Knepper (2013) and Burley (forthcoming).

[27] For further discussion of animal sacrifice, see Burley (2017). For multidisciplinary perspectives, see Meszaros and Zachhuber (2013).

Finally, a radical pluralist approach will test out the generalized claims of other philosophers of religion by undertaking a more rigorous search for counterexamples. Hick is far from alone in conflating Christian unconditional love (*agápē*) with Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*) and then treating this conflated virtue as the core of religious ethics in general.[28] Indeed, even some prominent Buddhists view their own conception of compassion as coterminous with 'the real essence of religion' (Dalai Lama 1984: 20). As a religious claim, this is not without philosophical interest, yet it should not be treated uncritically as a straightforward truth either about the essence of religion or even about the essence of Buddhism in particular. However much we may sympathize with the irenic intent of those who make the claim, a radical pluralist approach requires an investigation that refrains from prioritizing harmonious inter- and intra-faith relations over due recognition of divergence and heterogeneity. One might start by examining the multiplicity of ways in which 'compassion' has been expressed through action, doctrine and narrative in Buddhist traditions themselves. There we find, in the *Mettā Sutta* (*c.* fourth–second century BCE), the idea that one should look upon all living beings as a mother looks upon her only child (see Norman 2001: 19). Yet we also find, in other texts, injunctions to eschew familial ties and to instead 'wander solitary as a rhinoceros horn' (Norman 2001: 5–9). In Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular, the importance given to the doctrine of 'skilful means' or 'expedient methods' (*upāya kauśalya*) allows for acts of deliberate killing and even rape and plunder to be construed as 'compassionate', provided the acts are committed by bodhisattvas whose motivation is deemed to be ultimately benign (Tatz 1994: 73–74; Tsogyal 1993: 39). And one of the most famous and popular stories in Theravāda Buddhism is that of the Buddha's former life as Prince Vessantara, whose extreme generosity culminates in his giving away his wife and children (Appleton and Shaw 2015: 594–621). None of this goes to show that the virtue of compassion is not central to Buddhist traditions. It does, however, indicate that 'compassion' (*karuṇā*) can manifest in many different forms in those traditions, and hence that we ought not to assume in advance of careful contextualized analysis that we know perfectly well what such a virtue must consist in. Compassion, we might say, has a whole family of applications here. We have no firm basis upon which to extend the concept to other religions in a way that assumes a universal doctrine.

Concluding Remarks

The respective positions of John Hick and John Cobb represent two important stars within the overall constellation of theories of religious pluralism. While we should be careful not to essentialize such theories and to suppose that the plurality of pluralisms is reducible to one or two theoretical standpoints, we should also not overlook the overriding tendency exhibited by many pluralist theories to fall short of doing justice to the radical plurality of religious and nonreligious perspectives in the world around us. Hick's homogenizing approach seeks to show that all the 'great' religious traditions are merely mythologically true, mythological truth being a kind of pragmatic truth: they are true insofar as they assist their adherents to develop soteriologically, and

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[28] See, e.g. Armstrong (2010: 345): 'Compassion is regarded as the highest of the virtues in all the major religious traditions…honor the stranger; love even your enemies.'

soteriological development is equated with ethical improvement. So, in short, religions are true to the extent that they help believers to be more ethical—to live a life in accordance with the shared values that Hick claims to find in the religions' scriptures. If one wishes to know what is really true, as opposed to merely mythologically true, one must, according to Hick, pay attention to his pluralistic hypothesis, which offers us a conception of 'the Real' that, as many critics have noted, ends up being so conceptually thin as to be almost vacuous.[29]

Cobb's complementary pluralism is more forthcoming in admitting to be a position within Christian theology. On the face of it, it differs from Hick's homogenizing approach in that it postulates a trio of aspects of 'ultimate reality' that serve as the basis of a religious typology. Cobb's vision of an uplifted world is of one in which religious believers recognize that insights and knowledge are not merely present in other religions but may readily be drawn upon and appropriated for the enhancement of one's own religious life. While purporting to be 'deep' and 'radical', however, Cobb's pluralism turns out to be a mode of Christian apologetics inasmuch as it treats Christianity as preeminent among religions—preeminent on account of its being most capable of learning from the others.[30]

Neither Hickian nor Cobbian pluralism prioritizes—or pretends to prioritize—the study of religion and of religions in a disinterested way. They, like many others involved in debates over religious pluralism, are eager to learn about the diversity of religious and nonreligious viewpoints only to the extent that such learning can assist with the construction and promotion of their own preferred vision of global religious harmony. While many of their readers may concur that seeking harmony is an admirable goal, there are risks involved in conflating this quest with the objective of deepening our understanding of the diversity of religious and nonreligious forms of human life. Radical pluralism—in the sense of this term derived from D. Z. Phillips rather than from Cobb—prioritizes understanding over the furtherance of one's own theological project. It would be unrealistic to suppose that it is straightforwardly value-neutral, since it, like most forms of enquiry, embodies certain values. As Phillips admits, it is not 'a view from nowhere' (2004: 55). The values it embodies include, centrally, that of striving for a nonpartisan perspective—for a perspective on religion and on nonreligion that is itself committed to neither a religious ('confessional') nor a nonreligious ideology or tradition. It is not obvious how these values could be defended by appeal to anything more fundamental than themselves. Ultimately, the appeal would have to be to the reader's own values. To the extent that one considers doing conceptual justice to the particularities of diverse forms of life to be important, the appeal of a contemplative radically pluralist approach is likely to be evident. If, however, one's interest in learning about forms of life other than one's own is driven by an overriding urge to adapt or appropriate them in the service of some unifying theological enterprise, the virtues of the approach canvassed here are liable to be less transparent. In this article, I have begun to draw some lines of demarcation between this style of pluralism

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[29] For 'the suspicion that [Hick's] hypothesis is empty', see, e.g. Heim (1995: 37). Hick shows awareness of this type of criticism at, e.g. Hick (1995: 65–67).

[30] 'I am making a claim to Christian superiority. It is not a claim that Christians are better people than others, or that Christian history has made a more positive contribution…. The claim is only that a tradition in which Jesus Christ is the center has in principle no need for exclusive boundaries… [and] that its theology can become truly global' (Cobb 1990a: 92–93).

and those which, I have argued, result in an unhelpfully homogenized depiction of religious traditions. The fruits of a radical pluralist approach—in the form of an enhanced understanding of divergences as well as points of commonality between different perspectives and traditions—will come through putting it into practice.

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