

JOHN HICK: REMEMBERING AND MOURNING

On February 12, 2012, the man who was arguably the foremost philosopher of religion and philosophical theologian of the twentieth century died. John Hick wrote or edited some thirty books, many of them highly influential, all of them highly regarded. His books have been translated into some seventeen languages and over twenty books and some fifty doctoral dissertations have been written about his thought. He made seminal contributions to such issues as religious epistemology, the existence of God, religious language, religious experience, the problem of evil, life after death, Christology, religion and science, and religious pluralism (of which he was undoubtedly the world's most distinguished defender). A highly original thinker, Hick's views were influential and often controversial.

I first met John Hick in 1964 when I was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. It had been announced that Hick would be returning to England in 1965; accordingly, I took virtually every class that he offered that year. He was in the process of writing *Evil and the God of Love* (Harper & Row, 1966), and in one of the classes – a seminar on the problem of evil – we read much of the book in manuscript form. For a budding philosopher of religion like me, it was a great adventure.

During that year, I learned that Hick was not only a great scholar but also a kind and considerate man, a person of gentility and graciousness. He cared about his students. He was a great model for me. I learned from him to strive for clarity in all that I said and wrote, to offer only fair and judicious criticisms of the arguments of others with whom I disagreed, and to accept criticisms from them graciously. He was also a man of playful humor. He loved to tell this story about one of his trips to India: on an office door in a building in (I think) Delhi Hick saw a sign that actually said, "NO ADMITTANCE, EVEN WITH PERMISSION." Hick also explained that as a divinity student, years before, he invented a wholly imaginary theologian whom he called Pandiculous. In class one day he asked the Professor (a man whom Hick considered slightly pompous) what the professor thought Pandiculous would say about the topic they were discussing. The professor hemed and hawed and

quickly changed the subject; he did not want to admit that he had never heard of Pandiculous.

Hick significantly influenced me both in philosophy and in the area of how to be a teacher and scholar. But since I tend to be more theologically orthodox than Hick, his influence on me in theology was often negative. As I half-jokingly remarked at his retirement ceremony from Claremont Graduate University in 1992, if Hick proposed a theological claim, that to me was evidence against it.

Hick's Gifford lectures, published as *An Interpretation of Religion* (Macmillan, 1989), was undoubtedly his *magnum opus*. In it, he expounds and defends with great clarity and power his well-known theory of religious pluralism. Hick has explained on numerous occasions what moved him from being a liberal (but still recognizably Christian) Presbyterian to a religious pluralist and global theologian. It was his experience in religiously and ethnically diverse Birmingham, England from 1967 to 1979. Hick was deeply involved in working against racism and for justice and equal opportunity for immigrants from British Commonwealth countries; in that capacity, he became closely acquainted with devout Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. He found that he could no longer hold that all of them were religiously misguided and were heading for eternal hell.

There was great excitement in Claremont in 1979 when it became clear that John Hick was open to becoming our Danforth Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. Although I was then a young scholar with little influence at our colleges, it turned out that I was the only one in Claremont who knew John personally. So it was my pleasure to play a small role in recruiting him. Hick's tenure here was a wonderful time for philosophy of religion and theology in Claremont, and I believe for John himself. When he retired in 1992, he made it clear that he loved Claremont, and that he and his wife Hazel would have stayed here in retirement except for the fact that their children were living in England. It was also a great time for me. A highlight of my career was working with John on doctoral dissertations and philosophy of religion conferences.

John Hick of course had many students over the years, at Cornell, Princeton, Cambridge, Birmingham, and Claremont. All of them whom I know loved and respected him – even those who, like William L. Craig, Harold Netland, Gavin D'Costa and myself, disagreed with him. But he once told me that he did not want to have disciples; and in fact I think he had few of them. Hick was such a great thinker that I have sometimes wondered why that was true. Here is a guess: those thinkers in philosophy

and theology who develop scores of devoted followers are usually highly technical and obscure thinkers. They are the kind of people – Kant, Schleiermacher, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida – whose writings are difficult and whom you have to study for years in order to get a firm grip on their theories. My hypothesis is that once you've gone to all that effort to understand the ideas of the Master, you then can't abide the thought that he might have been wrong. And if anybody else dares to criticize the Master in a book or article, the immediate reply is that the critic has misunderstood him. John Hick wrote far too clearly and elegantly for anything like that.

I greatly admire John Hick the person at another point too: the way he carried himself with poise, dignity, and optimism through the ups and downs of life. The ups for him included: named chairs, distinguished lectureships, prestigious awards, honorary doctorates, receiving a *Festschrift*, and having a Centre for the Philosophy of Religion named for him. The downs included: heresy charges, the death of a son, the death of Hazel, and the physical infirmities of old age.

Agree with him or not, John Hick made all of us in theology and the philosophy of religion rethink things on virtually every issue that we face. We celebrate his life with great joy and mourn his death with great sadness.

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