

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 12, Religious Pluralism

© 2024 Jim Spiegel and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 12, Religious Pluralism.

Okay, we're going to talk about Religious Pluralism, which in this day and age is a major concern among a lot of people, not just scholars, but a typical person on the street, wondering about the implications of the fact that the world has all sorts of religions, ten or twelve major religions and then hundreds of others as well.

Is there one true religion, or are there many paths to God? That's the question here. So, we'll talk about the problem of religious pluralism. So here are the principal views.

There is the view known as Religious Pluralism, which is the idea that many different religions lead to the ultimate reality that you can find salvation through many different religions. Then, there is the view known as religious exclusivism, which is the view that only one religion is true and leads to the ultimate reality. A lesser-known view, which is known as religious inclusivism, is the view that there is one true religion, but all religious devotees are covert followers of the true religion.

So those are the three standard views: Pluralism, Exclusivism, and Inclusivism. So, let's look at a major proponent of the Pluralist view, which is John Hick, a major philosopher of religion in the 20th century and into the 21st century. Hick proposes that the various systems of salvation should be seen as, as he puts it, different forms of the more fundamental conception of a radical change from a profoundly unsatisfactory state to one that is limitlessly better because it rightly relates to the real.

So, we have all these different religions, all their different beliefs about God and their various practices, liturgies, and so on. These are all different expressions of a kind of singular human drive to find God and to find ultimate salvation. And Hick argues that there is a deep unity here. Even though the various religions, in many cases, look very different, there's a kind of core commonality among all the different religions.

He adds that we can only assess these different salvation projects, as he calls them, insofar as we are able to observe their fruits in human life. So, he distinguishes a couple of different patterns of spiritual transformation. You have saints or religiously devout people who withdraw from the world to, you know, prayer and meditation in a way that is separate from the rest of the world and human engagement, such as in a monastic context.

People like Julian of Norwich, Sri Aurobindo, or others would make that and take that approach. Then you have saints who seek to change the world on the other end of the spectrum, those who are very much activists with regard to making a cultural impact, maybe even a political impact with their faith. People like Joan of Arc or Mahatma Gandhi would fall into that category.

So, there's a whole range of approaches in terms of the kind of life one leads as a consequence of one's religious transformation. So, in the end, though, there are certain characteristics that tend to be observed in the religiously devout, such as whether they take more of a separatist or more of an activist approach in applying their faith. But how do we identify the kind of behavior that reflects that proper orientation to the divine reality? Hick's answer is that by using moral criteria implied by the world religion's shared ethical insights, namely that we should display the, as he puts it, unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion.

That is getting to the moral core of religious transformation. When we look at the devout in the world's religions, whether it's Christianity or Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, we tend to find these virtues of love and compassion consistently. Hick says that the personal virtues are pretty much the same within the different religious-cultural traditions, and he concludes that, quote, we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love or compassion than another.

So, there's a kind of parity when it comes to the capacity of a religious tradition to inspire virtue if one takes an honest look at the various religious traditions, particularly the major religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and so on. So, Hick offers a kind of Kantian analysis of the situation, maintaining that, quote, the mind is active in perception, imposing its own conceptual resources and habits on what one experiences in a religious context or when it comes to the approach to God or the ultimate spiritual reality. He calls it Kantian because Kant's epistemology, in a nutshell, was that we don't see the world in a kind of unfiltered, pure way.

The mind is not just a simple mirror of nature, but rather, the mind contributes certain rational categories and conceptual forms through which we interpret the world. Now, we typically don't notice that we're doing this, but that's just the nature of the human mind, to impose a kind of structure on reality such that that enables us to kind of understand things a certain way and to conceptualize and to think about the world in a certain way. Kant believed that that's just fundamental to the human epistemic condition and that even such things as space and time and thinking about objects in terms of quantity and quality were concepts that the mind imposes on reality, and we don't really know how the world is in itself.

We just know how the world is as we experience it. That's a basic Kantian epistemological move. Hick believes that taking that approach to our conception of God and how we approach the divine reality is helpful, and he sees the different religious perspectives as giving us rational categories that we then apply to our perspective on the divine.

So, in light of all that, Hick says that we make these two moves. First, postulate an ultimate transcendent divine reality that's beyond the scope of human concepts and direct experience. We need to acknowledge that there is a divine reality that is a kind of religious or spiritual in itself, and we need to use the Kantian language that exists independently of our thinking.

That's the ultimate reality that's there. We're trying to get at this thing. And the various, and this is the second point, the various religious deities and absolutes as manifestations of the real within different historical forms of human consciousness.

All of the different religious doctrines, theories, and theologies are, yes, manifestations of or expressions of that ultimate reality as interpreted by us through these categories. So, you have the ultimate reality, the divine in itself, and then you have that reality as we experience it through these theological, religious categories and concepts. And because whole religions kind of pivot on and depend upon certain concepts and categories, you have some very different kinds of religious traditions, and a whole variety of them emerge, even though they're getting at the same thing.

It's because the concepts and categories differ from culture to culture and from time to time. So, Hick offers some clarifications here. One, to say that the deities worshipped by the world religions are appearances of the real is not to say that they're illusions.

He's not saying that these are pure fiction because they are kind of interpretive devices. There is a reality there, but that reality is interpreted in different ways by different religious groups and traditions. So, again, the analogy with Kant is apropos because Kant doesn't believe that our current experience is illusory or fiction.

He just believes that it's interpreted. It doesn't adequately or ultimately accurately reflect what's really there. In fact, we can't know exactly how the thing in itself is precisely because we're always interpreting it through our rational categories.

And it would be the same way here, Hick would say, in terms of our religious approach to the ultimate reality, God, because we're always interpreting and getting a kind of interpretation through this, whatever our theological or religious framework is. You know, we can't really get at the divine in itself, but our interpretations are, they're not mere fictions either. They are interpretations and

perspectives that are affected by the religious and theological categories that we use.

Secondly, to say that the real is beyond the range of human concepts doesn't mean that formal logical concepts don't apply to it. So, the Kantian analysis, he says, is the best alternative to the naturalistic interpretation of religion, stating that all such experiences of the divine are merely mental projections and a construction of the human imagination. So, he rejects that naturalistic interpretation of religion.

The Kantian analysis is the best way to resist the naturalistic idea that it's all; all these religions are postulating pure fiction. No, it's real. The ultimate reality, God's reality, is real.

We just can't know what it is in itself. Hick distinguishes several levels at which religions differ doctrinally. One is in terms of their conceptions of the ultimate reality, the nature of the real.

Secondly, in terms of metaphysical beliefs, religions differ in this regard as well. Beliefs about the relation of the universe to the real. Creation ex nihilo, or is it a kind of emanation of the world from the being of God? You have different views about the origin of the universe.

Human destiny, you live one life and then it's the afterlife forever. Or are there systems of reincarnation, views on heaven and hell? There are all sorts of differences among the world religions regarding those metaphysical beliefs. Historical issues is another way in which religions differ doctrinally.

Beliefs about the nature of and exploits of Jesus, of Nazareth, of Muhammad, of Gautama, the Buddha, and so on. Hick concludes that we must reject the old exclusivist dogma that salvation is confined to Christianity. He notes Karl Rainer's inclusivist view that "devout people of other faiths are anonymous Christians within the invisible church, even without knowing it, and thus within the sphere of salvation."

Even a recent pope noted that every man, without exception, has been redeemed by Christ. Sometimes, you'll hear people who seem to be exclusivist talk, in at least inclusivist language, people who are theologically orthodox, recognizing that there is a certain wideness in God's mercy, as Clark Pinnock once put it. But does it go all the way? Does it go the whole distance to the religious pluralism of someone like John Hick, where you know, all or at least many religions are equally effective at providing salvation for the person who's seeking God? Someone of a more exclusivist ilk, but I'd say a generous exclusivist, is Keith Ward, the British scholar.

Ward is critical of Hick and, or his pluralist view, and here's how Ward characterizes the pluralistic thesis. This is quoting Ward, he says that religions provide different valid but culturally conditioned responses to a transcendent reality and offer ways of transcending self and achieving a limitlessly better state centered on that reality. That is Ward's way of summing up pluralism.

Furthermore, on this view, all will or can be saved by adhering to their own religious traditions. You don't have to be a universalist to be a pluralist. You can be a pluralist without being a universalist.

You can be a universalist without being a pluralist. There are all sorts of combinations here, but a lot of pluralists are universalists. Since all assertions affirm something, they must exclude something as well, Ward notes.

For this reason, he says, quote, all truth claims are necessarily exclusive. He also says that not all possible religious traditions can be equally true, authentic, or valid. There's incompatibility here when it comes to particular religions' claims about the nature of God and salvation and so on.

To the extent that they make claims, then there is a possibility for contradiction or mutual incompatibility of views. So, Ward rejects what he calls extreme pluralism, presumably the notion that all religions are equally true. That's just not possible since they make competing claims.

But then Ward distinguishes a version of pluralism that he calls hard pluralism, which is different than what he's calling extreme pluralism. Hard pluralism is the view that many major religions, quote, do not contain mutually exclusive beliefs but are equally valid paths of salvation and of authentic experience of the real. Again, there are many incompatible truth claims that divide religions, so this is problematic for hard pluralism.

Here, Hick or hard pluralists might reply that that's irrelevant to the knowledge of the real and the salvific process. It's because you have incompatible truth claims. It is still possible that these different religions can be equally effective as a means of bringing believers to salvation.

Moreover, the hard pluralist would say that the real, ultimately, and Hick is big on this point, is ineffable. It's not something that can be put into words or expressed in human language and categories. It's beyond the grasp of human thought.

Ward makes, I think, a good response here. He says that if the real is ineffable, if the ultimate reality is beyond the grasp of human thought and language, then how can we know that it exists? Can you have it both ways? Can you maintain that something is beyond the grasp of human thought and language but then be confident that it's

even there? So that's a problem for hard pluralism. He says if no truth claim can apply to the real, then how can we say anything about it? How can we theorize, as Hick does, to this extent that he's confident there's this ultimate reality that transcends all of the particular religious categories? If it is so transcendent, how can we know for sure that it's there or have any confidence that there is this ultimate reality beyond the interpretive religious and theological frameworks that we supposedly apply to it? And if the real is unknowable, how can we know that all claims about it are equally valid? You would have to know what the ultimate reality is in itself to be able to assess the different theological and religious frameworks and attempts to interpret it.

So, there seems to be an inconsistency here in terms of claims about the unknowability of the ultimate reality and its implications. While we can know enough about the ultimate reality, we also need to know that the different religious traditions are roughly equal in their accuracy in interpreting this reality. Ward notes that Aquinas, Thomas Aquinas, maintained that we do have genuine, if analogical, knowledge of God, but we cannot comprehend God's nature in itself. It's God's essence that is ineffable.

This Thomistic view affirms that our recognition of divine ineffability is based on a genuine knowledge of God. So, you know, Aquinas is certainly not a Hickian pluralist here. We do have genuine knowledge of God. Even if it is analogical knowledge, it's real.

And even if we're limited in terms of our ability or walled off from our ability to really grasp the true essence of God, we have knowledge of God nonetheless. So the error, the Kantian error that Hick makes, according to Ward, is, Kant maintained that the noumenal reality is the cause of all the phenomenal experiences that we have. But in maintaining this, Kant, quote, applies the categories of the mind beyond the permissible range of cognitive meaning, as Ward puts it.

He's claiming he's claiming more knowledge than his epistemology really entitles him to claim. If the noumenal or the in itself is beyond the reach of human cognition, then how can he say as much as he does about it? Ward says that, like Kant, John Hick is, quote, unable to renounce theoretical claims about the real entirely. It's irresistible.

Even in the context of making claims in defense of religious pluralism, Hick can't help himself in terms of making claims about the ultimate reality that he says we can't ultimately know. Furthermore, Ward says that Hick doesn't go far enough in making assertions about the real. He says it would be better if he abandoned the Kantian line that the real is noumenal or ultimately beyond the reach of the human mind and simply said that the real is an ultimate unity of reality and value.

That would be better. That would be more in sync with an exclusivist perspective. Ward notes that Hick affirms that there is a proper goal of human activity, which is reality-centered life, and that this presupposes that this must be consciously attained, which in turn implies that one must have certain correct beliefs in order to achieve it.

So again, there's kind of a tacit recognition of certain key exclusivist ideas in Hick that he can't get away from. But if that's the case, Ward says, we may ask what sorts of beliefs one must hold in order to be saved. This raises a very interesting question. What is it exactly that one must believe, say as a Christian, in order to achieve salvation? To what extent are beliefs even necessary? Are beliefs of a certain kind necessary in order for one to be saved? There are lots of interesting questions here.

If you insist that, well, certain beliefs are necessary, certain cognitive states for Christian salvation, then that would rule out the possibility that toddlers, infants, or aborted fetuses can ever be saved. They don't have any cognitive acceptance of Christian ideas yet. The Christian I've ever known has maintained that at least many, if not all, infants and fetuses that die in utero are saved.

So clearly, God is capable of and does, if one holds that view, save many people who don't have any kind of cognitive embrace of Christian truth. So, do things change as people get older? That would be a standard view that once you reach a certain age of cognitive maturity, then it becomes a requirement. But what is that age? There's a vagueness problem there.

So, the whole question of rational accountability in terms of salvation questions is a very interesting one that's related here. So, you're right; this is the question that all of us who are theists and Christians in particular need to wrestle with. Whether one is an exclusivist, an inclusivist, or a pluralist, what exactly is the necessary condition for salvation? Ward's response is that metaphysics is not what saves us. For Christians, the act of God establishing creatures in knowledge and love of him does that.

I think that's certainly a safe and correct claim. God is the one that establishes us in our salvation. But still, this is a separate question.

Even if you want to look at it as a kind of manifestation or symptomatic of the fact that God is working salvifically in one's life, what sorts of consequences or indicators of that will there be for us cognitively in terms of our beliefs? You could talk about the following in those terms: What are the indicators of cognitive salvation for human beings? Here, Ward suggests another version of pluralism, which he considers defensible and important. He calls it soft pluralism, the view that the real can manifest in many traditions and humans can respond to it appropriately in them. Which really sounds a lot like religious inclusivism.

The inclusivism of someone like C.S. Lewis. He was a sort of Christian inclusivist that God can and does work in Christian salvation in the hearts of certain people in even other religious contexts or in situations or contexts where there's not even a formal religious system embraced by a person. So, according to the Christian inclusivist, there's one exclusive truth regarding the way of salvation for human beings, and that's through Christ through the applied grace of God in a person's life, but God can do this outside of contexts of formal Christian religious practice.

The question is, well, in what form does that take? Well, it could take any number of forms, depending on the situation. So, that would be more of an inclusivistic approach. I think that's what Ward is getting at here.

So, to summarize Ward's critique of Hicks pluralism, Hicks pluralism affirms, again, that there is something wholly unknowable that is the ultimate reality, the ultimate divine reality. All experiences of it are equally authentic and all paths to fuller experience of it are equally valid. The problem is, as Ward has maintained, if it is the case that there's something wholly unknowable, that first proposition is true, then the second and third propositions can't be asserted.

We can't know that all experiences of it are equally authentic and we can't know that all paths to fuller experience of it are equally valid. So, Hick is making claims that he just has no way to rationally justify. So, that is Hicks pluralism and that's Ward's critique of religious pluralism.

This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 12, Religious Pluralism.