

04 John Hick, Religious Philosopher and Renegade Christian

Professor John Hick was one of the most influential philosophers of religion of the twentieth century, and a specialist on the different, global forms of religion. He was a practising Christian who moved easily in the company of people from other world faiths.

I've described him as a 'renegade' Christian because in his journey from starting out as an evangelical, fundamentalist Christian, to finally being a member of the Christian group known as the Quakers, he was twice accused of heresy.

He was also believed by Cardinal Ratzinger (later the Catholic Pope between 2005 and 2013) to be the source of malignant influences on the Christian church.

He died in 2012 when he was 90 years old, though he was actively engaged and writing on spiritual matters right until his death.

I have three books written by him; "Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason", "Who or What is God? And Other Investigations", and "The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm".

In the early 2000s I was fortunate to be invited to meet with him at his home in Birmingham for afternoon tea and biscuits, which he brought into the room on a traditional English tea trolley with proper teacups and tea pot. He appeared to be a quietly spoken, typical old-fashioned Englishman.

But in the second half of the twentieth century, he challenged several accepted, orthodox beliefs in Christianity.

I'm going to focus on three such beliefs; on the belief that Christianity is the only true religion and source of salvation; on the nature of God; and on what happens when we die.

The issues that he raises in these challenges are, I believe, relevant to our spiritual approach as practicing Buddhists.

The first belief he challenged was that Christianity is the only true religion and source of salvation.

When he was a young evangelical, John Hick himself subscribed to the view that Christianity is uniquely superior to all other faiths. But as he met people around the world from different faiths, he could no longer

hold to such an exclusive view, a view that condemned to hell all the people of the world who are not Christian, when they die.

As Hick points out, today the majority of Christian theologians and church leaders have moved away from this strict exclusivism to what is called inclusivism.

This view of inclusivism depends very much on the definition of salvation.

In this view salvation is indeed uniquely available through Jesus Christ but this salvation is not restricted in its availability to Christians alone but is in principle available to all human beings.

John Hick explains:

“People of good will outside the Church can be said to have an implicit Christian faith, or to be anonymous Christians, or to be in such a state that they *will* respond to Christ as their lord and saviour when they confront him after death. On this view Christianity remains the only true religion; but those who do not know Christ can also benefit from his atoning death.”

<http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/index.php/articles-by-john-hick/16-is-christianity-the-only-true-religion-or-one-among-others>

In other words, we may not know it, but we are all Christians, and will discover so when we die.

As Hick puts it, if you restrict the definition of salvation to being forgiven and accepted by God because of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, then, by definition, salvation can only be achieved through Christianity and Christianity remains the superior religion.

Hick asks us, however, to take a different approach, starting here and now with the realities of people’s lives around the world. We should look for those people who are engaged in a spiritual path that moves them away from a selfish self-centredness towards love and compassion for fellow beings. They are, says Hick, on the path to salvation.

Such a path is Christian, but it is also seen amongst those who are Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist. Hick concludes:

“There is in fact a basic moral outlook which is universal, and the concrete reality of salvation consists in a spiritual transformation whose natural expression is unrestricted love and compassion”.

Equally important to Hick's developing view over the years, was getting to know a small number of individuals from different faiths whom he regarded – in Christian terms – as saints, in the sense that they have transcended the ego point of view and become channels of some kind of higher divine reality.

Because of this, John Hick's position, is not that of exclusivism, or of inclusivism, but what is known as religious pluralism.

According to religious pluralism there is not just one and only one point of contact between 'the divine' or 'transcendental reality' and humanity. There is a plurality of independently valid contacts, and independently authentic spheres of salvation, which include both Christianity and the other great world faiths.

The philosophical and practical position of religious pluralism is relevant for all of us, whichever spiritual path we choose to follow.

We are all conditioned in our choices of spiritual path by the history and culture of where we are born and brought up, by our family upbringing, by the openness or closed nature of the society we live in, by our personal temperament, and other circumstances.

If we choose to become Buddhists we should not assume that Buddhism is the only religious tradition that offers a path to a transcendental reality, or that Buddhism is unquestionably superior to all other spiritual paths.

And we should take care not to get caught up in believing that some forms of Buddhism are superior to others. It's sad but true, for example, that some Theravadin Buddhist practitioners believe that Mahayana Buddhism is not true Buddhism, and conversely some Mahayana practitioners believe that Theravadin Buddhism is an inferior form of Buddhism.

Two weeks ago I gave a talk on David Loy and Bhikkhu Bodhi, who come from the very different Mahayana Zen and Theravadin traditions, but

both of whom convey the same message of awakening if we follow a spiritual path, even if those paths have quite different characteristics.

Moving on now to John Hick's view on the nature of God.

To explain his view of the nature of God, which is very different to most people's usual sense of God, John Hick turns to two Christian mystics.

He starts with a Christian monk, Dionysius, a Syrian monk whose writings date to around the fifth century. According to Hick, Dionysius argued:

“God is ‘indescribable’, ‘beyond all being and knowledge’. God, the ultimate One, is ‘not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding ... It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding ... It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time ... It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness . . It is not sonship or fatherhood ... There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it ... It is beyond assertion and denial’.

As John Hick emphasises, Dionysius is stating that our entire range of conceptual attributes do not apply to God at all. The nature of God is ineffable, is *transcategorical*.

Hick then brings in the thirteenth and fourteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart, who himself was influenced by Dionysius.

Eckhart distinguishes between what he calls the utterly transcategorical Godhead (*Gottheit, deitas*) and the worshipped God (*Gott, deus*).

In other words there is an ultimate divine reality which is beyond words and categories, and there is a humanly thinkable and experienceable form of the divinity, which humans call God.

Hick argues that this distinction between the ultimate divine reality and its humanly thinkable and experienceable form (or forms) is also found within each of the other great religious traditions.

For example, the Jewish mystics of the Kabbala distinguished between *Eyn Sof*, the Infinite, and the God of the scriptures. The Sufi mystics of Islam distinguished between the ineffable ultimate reality, *Al-Haqq*, usually translated as the Real, and the revealed God of the Qur'an.

And, as John Hick points out, the *trikaya* doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism fits within this pattern.

According to this doctrine, a Buddha has three distinct aspects. The Dharmakaya is ultimate reality which is ineffable, beyond all concepts. The Sambhogakaya is that ultimate reality as it manifests to humans in the forms of the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And the Nirmanakaya is the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha's existence on this planet as a human being.

This leads John Hick to conclude that the different belief systems of the world's religions are descriptions of different manifestations of the ultimate reality. They each arise from some powerful religious experience, but these experiences are always formed in the terms available to that individual or community at that time and are then further elaborated within the resulting new religious movements.

Hick writes:

... it seems right to say with the thirteenth century Muslim writer Jalaludin Rumi, writing about the religions of his time, 'The lamps are different, but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond' (*Rumi, Poet and Mystic*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, 1978, p. 166)."

Finally, we move on to the third area where John Hick challenged the orthodox Christian view; what happens when we die.

The traditional Christian view is that when we die, we go either heaven or hell.

However, John Hick was sympathetic to Buddhism, and was very open to the belief in rebirth and karma.

Here's what he wrote on rebirth and karma:

"Most westerners, whether they accept, or more often reject, the idea of a life after death think in terms of an eternal heaven and hell.

For most easterners, on the other hand, what they either accept or reject is the idea of a journey through many lives.

Which of these options is for us the standard idea to be either accepted or rejected depends in the great majority of cases on where we were born.

However philosophy, in contrast to theology, tries to transcend this global postcode lottery.

And it seems to me that, given the possibility of more life than the present one, then from a religious point of view the eastern model is to be preferred.

For at the end of this short life very few, if indeed any, are ready for either eternal bliss or eternal punishment. But on the other hand, all are ready for further growth and development.

And if such a process is indeed taking place, we are all clearly at an early stage in it. If it is to proceed it requires further interactions with others within a common environment.

It seems that this must take the form of further mortal lives, lived within the boundaries of birth and death, because it is the inexorable pressure of these boundaries that gives life the urgency that an unlimited horizonless future would lack.

The cosmic scenario that best meets these requirements is some form of the concept of rebirth or reincarnation.”

(From ‘Reincarnation and the Meaning of Life’: (A talk given to the Open End, Birmingham, December 2002)

To be clear, Hick understands that the Buddhist view is not that the present conscious self is reborn and lives again. This, he says, is the common misconception of most westerners.

Instead, he continues, it’s a deeper element within us, it’s a dispositional structure that continues into the next life.

He likens this to the metaphor of a relay race. We are the current carriers of the torch, handed onto us from a previous life. We now carry the fundamental dispositional structure the previous person had, and that

person modified it for better or worse. And we again in our lives are modifying it and handing it on to some future individual personality.

<https://youtu.be/IWRVD9BZ50o>

What I like about John Hick is that he does recognise that we cannot know for sure what happens when we die. As he puts it, we will have to wait and see.

I mentioned earlier how I was fortunate to meet with him and discuss spiritual matters.

But, right at the end of our discussion about rebirth, he paused, gave a little smile, and looked at me, saying:

“Of course, it could just be wishful thinking.”

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/azaj6a6o9p8uno4xsziuv/04-English-Only-John-Hick.MP3?rlkey=5h1xvos29mrzmwm9nof3pqp3n&dl=0>