

John Hick's Copernican Revolution: Ten Years After

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It was in 1973, in his book *God and the Universe of Faiths*, that Professor John Hick argued for a Copernican revolution in the Christian theology of religions. His argument met quite a lot of criticism, and it is fairly widely thought that the debate is today a dead one. How true is this?

In his book he characterised as "Ptolemaic" the view which has been allegedly held for at least the last "fifteen centuries" which proclaims that "all men, of whatever race or culture, must become Christians if they are to be saved".¹ He cites the Decree of the Council of Florence (1438—1445) which upheld the traditional Catholic position, summed up in the axiom, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—there is no salvation outside the Church. He maintains that Vatican II and modern theologians such as Karl Rahner propound further epicycles of the same Ptolemaic view, as they still assume "without question that salvation is only in Christ and through incorporation into his mystical body, the Church".² He feels that there is little difference between Roman Catholics and Protestant positions on this issue.

The Ptolemaic system held that the earth was at the centre of the universe and explained the movement of the planets (which did not conform to the theory) through "epicycles". The increasing number of epicycles rendered the Ptolemaic view less and less plausible until finally the Copernican view, in its simple explanation of the facts by the theory that the sun rather than the earth was the centre of the universe, replaced it. In an analogous manner, Hick thinks that the prevailing Christian theology of religions is like the antiquated Ptolemaic view, creating epicycle after epicycle to maintain an increasingly implausible system. He proposes a Copernican revolution whereby we "shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all religions, including our own, serve and revolve round him".³ The main argument used by Hick for this important shift is that a "God of love who seeks to save all mankind" could not have, as the Christian teaching implies, "ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation".⁴

If this Copernican shift were accepted it would mean that the major world religions could now be seen as "encounters from

different historical and cultural standpoints with the same infinite divine reality and as such they lead to differently focused awareness of that reality".⁵ They are to be viewed, therefore, as equally effective and valid paths to salvation—a fact which can be verified only in the final eschatological unity.⁶

What has been happening since the book's first appearance? During the years Hick has added a number of epicycles to the Copernican revolution in the light of various criticisms. The most important epicycle was in response to the criticism that it was a Christian God at the centre of the universe of faiths.⁷ He introduced a Kantian-type distinction between the "noumenal world, which exists independently of an outside man's perception of it, and the phenomenal world, which is that world as it appears to our human consciousness".⁸ The "Divine Reality" or "Eternal One", Hick argued, was analogous to the noumenal realm. The varying phenomenal responses within the different religious traditions, both theistic and non-theistic, were to be seen to be authentic responses to this noumenal Divine Reality. This shift, with the use of the terms "Eternal One", "Ultimate Reality" and "The Real" to designate the noumenal reality, repudiated two types of criticism. It circumvented the charge that it was the Christian God inhabiting the centre of the universe of faiths. And it also allowed Hick to distinguish his position from that of the Hindu Advaita Vedānta view (which held that God is ultimately "non-personal...and that the worship of personal Gods belongs to a lower and preliminary stage of the religious life"⁹) and from the "viśiṣṭadvaita view that Brahman is ultimately personal".¹⁰ This meant that, unlike Hinduism, the "Real is equally authentically thought and experienced as personal and non-personal".¹¹

Whatever one may think of these newer arguments, the question remains: what justification is there, in the first place, for Hick's either/or choice between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican views? Has he demonstrated the necessity of a Copernican revolution?

He has surely minimized the options available, in his identifying of the Ptolemaic viewpoint with one that consigns the majority of mankind to "everlasting fire". There is the odd omission of any detailed discussion of the biblical view, or the early Fathers' discussion of the problem of the relationship of Christianity to the non-Christian world and the availability of grace.¹²

A study of that type would have been especially relevant for the understanding of the original intention and meaning of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* axiom which Hick attacks. It was formulated in the third century by Origen (c. 185—254) in Alexandria and Cyprian (c. 206—258) in Carthage, primarily with reference to Christians who separate themselves from the Church and not with reference to the non-Christian religions—of which they knew little or nothing. The axiom was taken up by

Augustine (354—430) and by his disciple Fulgentius of Ruspe (467—533), from whom it entered into the theology of the middle ages. The quotation that Hick uses from the Council of Florence is in fact from a text of Fulgentius used by the Council: “Not only all pagans, but also all Jews, all heretics and schismatics who end this earthly life outside the Catholic Church go into eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels”.¹³ There are two important considerations that should be stressed in understanding this teaching. The first consideration, urged by Yves Congar, is that it was formulated more in faithfulness to the central preoccupation of the Fathers, “that there is no salvation except through Christ”, than with reference to the non-Christian religions.¹⁴ Secondly, Fulgentius’ formula, when viewed in its historical and textual context, refers to those in bad faith who have separated themselves from the Church, rather than the Hindu or Buddhist. In chapters 37 and 39 of *De Fides ad Petrum* Fulgentius speaks of the validity of baptism outside the Church which is, nevertheless, useless because the gift of charity is missing in people who separate themselves from the Church. Although Fulgentius includes the pagans and Jews in his stricture, this is an obvious extension of the same principle, for he considers that the gospel has been offered to all men and therefore, in not confessing Christ, they too must be in bad faith.¹⁵

This reading is given further support if the “ecclesia ab Abel” teaching of Fulgentius’ master, Augustine, is considered. In his controversies with the Pelagians Augustine stressed that grace was operative in the Old Testament and therefore there were Christians (without the name) before Christ who possessed the same grace as post-New Testament Christians.¹⁶ In fact this idea of the community of the elect dating back to the beginning of the human race is found in the writings of Justin, Ireneus and Origen, and later in Eusebius, Jerome and Ambrosiaster.¹⁷

It is evident that Hick’s reading of the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* neglects both its development and context and thereby unintentionally distorts its meaning.

Moving on to more recent developments, the various utterances by Pius IX and Pius XII¹⁸ are attempts to clarify the issue which Vatican II took up in *Nostra Aetate*.¹⁹ The Council held that salvation was possible outside the visible boundaries of the Church and could be effected in the lives of men of goodwill, including the non-culpable atheist, the Hindu, Buddhist and others. It also made quite clear that this salvific grace was mediated solely through Christ. The Council did not intend to provide a clear theology on this point and the elucidation of these texts was taken up by Karl Rahner. But his theory of the anonymous Christian is seen by Hick as representative of the most recent epicycles in a crumbling Ptolemaic system.

Hick points out that Rahner’s conclusions assert that the non-

Christian may be “within the sphere of divine grace although he does not know the source of that grace as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”.²⁰ Hick then concludes that “clearly Rahner is struggling valiantly to do justice to the reality of religious faith outside Christianity, but equally clearly he has not been able to face the Copernican revolution that is required”.²¹ However, for the following reasons it is not clear to me that Hick has shown why Rahner’s theory is unacceptable or characterizable as Ptolemaic.

To say, as Hick does, that it is just another epicycle of the old Ptolemaic theology when the Ptolemaic view has been clearly identified as denying salvation outside the explicit Christian Church and therefore condemning the majority of mankind, is a misunderstanding and false characterization of Rahner—who denies both these propositions.²² In fact, Rahner’s second major premise on which he builds his theory of the anonymous Christian includes Hick’s central premise: the universal salvific will of God. But Rahner, unlike Hick, also holds another premise on which the second is grounded: it is *only* through the grace of God, revealed definitively in Christ, that men and women can be saved. This misunderstanding of Rahner is evidence of Hick’s failure to grasp that the central preoccupation of Rahner’s theory (and the early Church’s axiom) is the *causal source* of redemptive grace. It is because the Christian finds the *definitive* shape of grace (to express it pictorially) in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that he must claim that *all* grace—wherever it is to be found—is the grace of God as revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ. Hick equates such a Christology as necessarily implying that the “experience of salvation, of consciousness of God, of liberation from the bondage of sin, of new life in response to the divine call, reported from within other faiths is illusory”.²³

It is clear that he unnecessarily links the definitive status of Christ (as being the one mediator of grace) with the restriction of grace and salvation exclusively to Christians. This is not the case with Rahner (or the early Church) and it is Hick’s failure to appreciate this “*via media*” between the Ptolemaic/Copernican options which leads to his later difficulties. Incidentally, this quotation shows through its use of Christian terms such as “salvation”, “sin”, “divine call”, that even to speak in such a fashion requires some implicit understanding of the shape of grace. Otherwise terms like “consciousness of God” lose all meaning. (Admittedly, Hick in recent publications has changed his terminology when talking of salvation. It is now described as turning from “self-centredness to Reality centredness”.²⁴ I will return shortly to this linguistic escape from the Ptolemaic viewpoint).

Another of Hick’s criticisms arises in connection with the doctrine of “implicit desire” which he equates with Rahner’s position. He argues that this doctrine fails “since presumably only theists can have a sincere desire to do God’s will”.²⁵ This comment misses the point that it is not *explicit* but

implicit desire that is being discussed. If we understand, through Christ, that God's will includes radical selfless love for the other, there can be little objection to recognizing selfless love shown by an atheist or Theravādin Buddhist as an *implicit* carrying out of God's will.

A final argument offered by Hick against Rahner is that "in principle a Ptolemaic type of theology can be operated not only from within Christianity, but equally from within any other faith".²⁶ This would, for example, allow the Advaitist to speak of a Christian as an "anonymous Advaitist". This objection mistakes the context of Rahner's reflections. He is trying to address the Christian's self-understanding in explaining the real possibility of salvific grace operating outside the visible Church. To point out the similar use of such an explanatory principle by an Advaitist is not to argue against the possible *truth* or *validity* of Rahner's position.

This is not the place for arguing for the cogency of Rahner's position.²⁷ I only want to point out that Hick unintentionally misrepresents a major strand of Christian thought on the relationship of Christianity to the non-Christian religions. If, as I have indicated, there is a cogent position which overcomes Hick's paradox (a God of universal love ordaining the majority of mankind to hell) while holding together the two principles of salvation through Christ alone and of the universal salvific will of God, then he has failed to show that it is a "Copernican revolution that is required".

However, even if we were to accept that a Copernican revolution is required, there are two further fundamental objections to Hick's proposals. The first, which differs from those of earlier critics who pointed out that it was a Christian God at the centre of the universe of faiths, is that the decisive argument justifying the Copernican shift requires an all-loving God. The problem, for Hick, is that such a claim needs grounding and it is difficult to see how he can avoid becoming Ptolemaic in carrying out such a task. How does he ground this claim?

He argues that it is certainly not from philosophical reasoning that we learn of such a God, but, it would seem, from a religious experience.²⁸ However, if Hick relies solely on religious experience, then, by his own requirements, he must give equal status to the ontological assertions of non-theistic religious experience. This would then undermine his initial premise, since many a non-theistic religion (such as Advaita Vedānta or Madhyāmika Buddhism) would strongly deny the ultimate ontological status of an all-loving God.

Another option which is at times chosen by him is to ground the assertion of an all-loving God in the specific fact that the Christian experiences his life "in greater or lesser degree, as being lived in the presence of God, as made known to us by Jesus" and in this sense Jesus is "decisive" for him.²⁹ When pressed I believe that Hick would have to justify his position by this argument, with the *implicit* claim of a "decisive" status, or role, for Jesus. This would be necessary in order to sustain the

status for the claim of an all-loving God against competing images, such as a blood-thirsty tribal deity. This leaves him sliding back in the direction of the Ptolemaic camp implicitly holding a special place for Christianity, or at least the Christian revelation.

If this speculative pushing of Hick's position to justify itself is accepted, then, to come full circle, we can more clearly appreciate the dismissed middle ground occupied by Rahner, who holds to both the unique status of Christ *and* the universal salvific will of God. Hick's failure to keep these two principles in balance results in the difficulties I have outlined.

It is now clear that his Copernican epicycle designed to overcome the charge of Christian bias undercuts the basis for the Copernican revolution itself. However, not only has this shift made his position more difficult to justify; it has also made it—in his view—less vulnerable to attack. To speak of salvation as a turning from “self-centredness to Reality-centredness” removes the Ptolemaic linguistic echoes. But it also removes substantial content from the notion of salvation and the different religious truth claims. Whether the various religions are equally valid salvific apprehensions of the one divine reality is a question that can only be decided, he argues, through eschatological verification.

It is precisely the introduction of this final escape route that poses yet another objection to Hick's Copernican revolution. Dr. P. Almond, in a recent article, asks whether it is “reasonable to demand a Copernican revolution...while the possibility remains that, in the final eschatological analysis, it *may* turn out that a Ptolemaic Christian view of some sort or other was theologically valid”?³⁰ Almond does not pursue this charge, but could have if he had turned to Hick's own eschatological speculations in *Death and Eternal Life*.³¹ The charge that I wish to pursue is that Hick *has* in fact carried out such an “eschatological analysis”—and the eschaton is quite definitely theistic, if not altogether Christian.

In two important publications since his Copernican shift, *Death and Eternal Life* and *Encountering Evil*³², Hick's “Ultimate Reality” or “Eternal one” is quite clearly, come the eschaton, the liberal Christian's God at the end of the universe of faiths in loving communion with all humankind. He describes his own position as one which “depicts persons as still in the course of creation towards an end-state of perfected personal community in the divine kingdom. This end-state is conceived as one in which individual egoity has been transcended in communal unity before God”.³³ We should also notice his admission, in these works, that this position requires a “conception of God as personal Lord, distinct from his creation”.³⁴ And that this eschatological view “implicitly rejects the *advaitist* view that Atman *is* Brahman, the collective human self being ultimately identical with God”.³⁵

If this is the case, then Hick seems to hold two contradictory positions. Firstly, both theistic and non-theistic religions are equally salvific

in value and the “Real is *equally authentically thought and experienced* as personal and non-personal” (my emphasis). Secondly, and to my mind incompatibly, he holds that our final (and therefore presumably true) relation to the Real is one of eternal loving communion with a *personalistic*, all-loving God. If this is so, on what grounds can it be asserted that the non-personalist, non-theistic religions are as equally authentic as the personalist, theistic ones? Will not the Advaitist, Theravādin Buddhist and adherent of Sāmkhya Yoga all find that their *thought and experience* of the Real was not equally as authentic or appropriate as the personalist religions?

At this point in the argument, he may retort that in the eschatological process he has allowed for the possibility of the correction, enlargement, or transformation, of different religious dogmas.³⁶ The Advaitist, for example, would only gradually come to recognize the way “things are” in the course of the many after-lives. However, if he were to pursue this path, we would then have to ask on what grounds can he claim that these non-theistic religions, as they *now* exist, are equally salvific and equally true. (The relationship between thought and praxis should not be minimized).

If Hick’s theistic God is removed from the *centre* of the universe of faiths (through the epicycle just considered) we find that in the final “eschatological analysis” it reappears at the *end* of the universe of faiths, once more pushing Hick back into the Ptolemaic camp from which he is trying to escape. This irresolvable dilemma in his position is generated by his early theistic concerns which he has carried over into his global theology; theodicy, and his theory of religious language as empirically referential and cognitively meaningful—which run counter to his Kantian-type epistemological shift, which tends towards agnosticism.

What are we to conclude from all this? Hick has mistakenly simplified an important middle-ground position in the question of the salvation of the non-Christian. Consequently his own Copernican revolution, in its underlying assumptions, is closer to his Ptolemaic rivals than he himself would recognize. So, some ten years after the debate began, it would seem that Hick’s Copernican revolution is just another, but rather confused, Ptolemaic epicycle. Despite this confusion, his Copernican revolution raises questions which continue to be of great importance in the debate about a Christian theology of religions.³⁷

1 *God and the Universe of Faiths* (subsequently referred to as *GUF*) p. 120 (page numbering is that of the Fount edition of 1977).

2 *ibid.* p. 126.

3 *ibid.* p. 131.

4 *ibid.* p. 122.

5 *ibid.* p. 141.

- 6 ibid. p. 147 and 'On Grading Religions', *Religious Studies* Vol. 17, 1981, p. 462.
- 7 D. Forrester, 'Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths', *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol 29, (Feb. 1976), pp. 65—72; J. Lipner, 'Does Copernicus help?', *Religious Studies* Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1977), pp. 243—248.
- 8 J. Hick, *Towards a Philosophy of Religious Pluralism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980) p. 142. Subsequently referred to as TAPRP.
- 9 TAPRP, p. 145.
- 10 J. Hick, 'The Theology of Religious Pluralism', *Theology* Vol. LXXXVI, Sept. 1983, p. 337.
- 11 ibid. p. 337.
- 12 For a discussion of the biblical view that runs counter to Hick's characterisation of the Christian tradition, cf: M. Cyriac, *Meetings of Religions* (Madras, 1982), esp. ch 1 and ch 2; H.R. Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (Frieburg: Herder/London: Burns and Oates, 1966). For an assessment of the early Fathers on this question, once again running against Hick's reading of the tradition, cf: Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (E.T., Ireland: Ecclesia Press, 1969); P. Hacker, 'The Religions of the Gentiles as viewed by the Fathers of the Church', *ZMR, Oct., 1970, No. 4*; J. Daniélou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (E.T., London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1957), Introduction; J. Dupuis, 'The Cosmic Christ in the Early Fathers', *Indian Journal of Theology* XV, July—Sept., 1966; M. Cyriac, op. cit., ch. 3.
- 13 Denzinger 714. From Fulgentius' *De Fide ad Petrum* ch 38, (PL, 65,704A)
- 14 Y. Congar, *The Wide World my Parish* (E.T., London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), p.94.
- 15 J. Neuner, 'Votum Ecclesiae' in ed. G. Gispert-Sauch, *God's Word Among Men* (Delhi: Vidyajoti, 1973), p. 149. I am indebted to Neuner on this point.
- 16 St. Augustine, *Contra duas epistolas Pelag.* Book III, ch. 6 (iv)ff. in ed.. P. Schaff, *Library of Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Church* (Michigan: Erdman's Pub. Co., 1978), pp. 404ff.
- 17 Neuner, op. cit., p. 149 and footnote 12.
- 18 Denzinger 1647ff, 3821, 3866ff.
- 19 eds. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1976), pp. 272—278, for an introduction to the three relevant Conciliar documents.
- 20 *GUF*, p.127.
- 21 ibid. p. 128.
- 22 For the explication and development of Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian see the *Theological Investigations* Vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd/New York: Seabury Press, 1966), ch. 6; Vol. 6 (1969), ch. 16 and 23; Vol. 9 (1972), Ch. 9; Vol. 12 (1974), ch. 9; Vol. 14 (1976), ch. 17; Vol. 16 (1979), ch. 4 and 13; Vol. 17 (1980), ch. 5.
- 23 *GUF*, p. 177.
- 24 Hick, *Religious Studies* op. cit., p. 467.
- 25 *GUF*, p.131.
- 26 ibid. p. 131.
- 27 See my forthcoming article, 'Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian—A Reappraisal' in *Modern Theology* (1985).
- 28 *GUF*, ch. 3 and 6.
- 29 J. Hick, 'Pluralism and the Reality of the Transcendent', *Christian Century* Jan. 21st 1981, pp. 47—48.
- 30 P. Almond, 'John Hick's Copernican Theology', *Theology* Vol. LXXXVI, Jan. 1983, p. 39—40 (my emphasis).
- 31 (Fount, 1979), esp. pp. 458—465. Subsequently referred to as *DEL*.
- 32 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), esp. pp. 39—52. Subsequently referred to as *EE*.

- 33 *EE*, p. 51. Significantly, this is basically the same position found in Hick's pre-Copernican days (and nevertheless universalist!) in *Evil and the God of Love* (Fount, 1979. First ed. 1966).
- 34 *DEL*. p. 464.
- 35 *ibid.* p. 464.
- 36 Hick, *Theology* *op. cit.*, p. 338.
- 37 *Theology, Religious Studies* and the *Scottish Journal of Theology* have all printed articles on this debate in the last year (1982—83). *New Blackfriars* last January printed an article by Dan Cohn-Sherbok suggesting a Copernican revolution in Judaism. Hasan Askari has proposed a similar Copernican shift in Islam, and both these scholars acknowledge their debt to John Hick. So far three doctoral dissertations have been written on Hick's theology of religions, and another is in progress.

Religious Art and Religious Belief

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Few sociologists of religion have been tempted to explore the visual dimension of religious change. The problems—both theoretical and methodological—are formidable.

In the first place, when scrutinizing religious art in any culture we have to be very careful about our assumptions concerning the iconicity of religious symbols and the so-called creative character of visual images. Richard Wollheim, for one, has argued persuasively that when we discuss iconicity in any cultural setting we have to take account of the relation of the sign to the sign-user as well as what is represented by the sign, i.e. the referent. It is, he says, "when signs become for us ... 'fuller' objects, that we may also come to feel that they have greater appropriateness to their referents".¹ The problem for sociologists of religion is just how to tease this kind of sense data from respondents.

Secondly: as Hugh Duncan has noted, "the problem is not that of asserting that there is a reciprocal relation between art and society, but rather of showing *how* this relationship exists".² 'Proof' might be arrived at by establishing either valuative congruence, social structural influence or interpersonal influence within the artistic vocation itself. But here we also need to postulate a psychological mechanism through which the individual artist transmutes social, cultural and credal themes into tangible artistic statements, as well as a theory of perception and