Hick's Religious Pluralism and "Reformed Epistemology": A Middle Ground

David Basinger

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The purpose of this discussion is to analyze comparatively the influential argument for religious pluralism offered by John Hick and the argument for religious exclusivism (sectarianism) which can be generated by proponents of what has come to be labeled ‘Reformed Epistemology.’ I argue that while Hick and the Reformed exclusivist appear to be giving us incompatible responses to the same question about the true nature of ‘religious’ reality, they are actually responding to related, but distinct questions, each of which must be considered by those desiring to give a religious explanation for the phenomenon of religious diversity. Moreover, I conclude that the insights of neither ought to be emphasized at the expense of the other.

No one denies that the basic tenets of many religious perspectives are, if taken literally, quite incompatible. The salvific claims of some forms of Judeo-Christian thought, for example, condemn the proponents of all other perspectives to hell, while the incompatible salvific claims of some forms of Islamic thought do the same.

Such incompatibility is normally explained in one of three basic ways. The non-theist argues that all religious claims are false, the product perhaps of wish fulfillment. The religious pluralist argues that the basic claims of at least all of the major world religions are more or less accurate descriptions of the same reality. Finally, the religious exclusivist argues that the tenets of only one religion (or some limited number of religions) are to any significant degree accurate descriptions of reality.

The purpose of this discussion is to analyze comparatively the influential argument for religious pluralism offered by John Hick and the argument for religious exclusivism which can be (and perhaps has been) generated by proponents of what has come to be labeled ‘Reformed Epistemology.’ I shall argue that while Hick and the Reformed epistemologist appear to be giving us incompatible responses to the same question about the true nature of ‘religious’ reality, they are actually responding to related, but distinct questions, each of which must be considered by those desiring to give a religious explanation for the phenomenon of religious diversity. Moreover, I shall conclude that the insights offered by both Hick and the Reformed epistemologist are of value and, accordingly, that those of neither ought to be emphasized at the expense of the other.
Hick's contention is not that different religions make no conflicting truth claims. In fact, he believes that “the differences of belief between (and within) the traditions are legion,” and has often in great detail discussed them. His basic claim, rather, is that such differences are best seen as “different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine Reality.”

However, if the various religions are really “responses to a single ultimate transcendent Reality,” how then do we account for such significant differences? The best explanation, we are told, is the assumption that “the limitless divine reality has been thought and experienced by different human mentalities forming and formed by different intellectual frameworks and devotional techniques.” Or, as Hick has stated the point elsewhere, the best explanation is the assumption that the correspondingly different ways of responding to divine reality “owe their differences to the modes of thinking, perceiving and feeling which have developed within the different patterns of human existence embodied in the various cultures of the earth.” Each “constitutes a valid context of salvation/liberation; but none constitutes the one and only such context.”

But why accept such a pluralistic explanation? Why not hold, rather, that there is no higher Reality beyond us and thus that all religious claims are false—i.e., why not opt for naturalism? Or why not adopt the exclusivistic contention that the religious claims of only one perspective are true?

Hick does not reject naturalism because he sees it to be an untenable position. It is certainly possible, he tells us, that the “entire realm of [religious] experience is delusory or hallucinatory, simply a human projection, and not in any way or degree a result of the presence of a greater divine reality.” In fact, since the “universe of which we are part is religiously ambiguous,” it is not even unreasonable or implausible “to interpret any aspect of it, including our religious experience, in non-religious as well as religious ways.”

However, he is quick to add, “it is perfectly reasonable and sane for us to trust our experience”—including our religious experience—“as generally cognitive of reality except when we have some reason to doubt it.” Moreover, “the mere theoretical possibility that any or all [religious experience] may be illusory does not count as a reason to doubt it.” Nor is religious experience overturned by the fact that the great religious figures of the past, including Jesus, held a number of beliefs which we today reject as arising from the now outmoded science of their day, or by the fact that some people find “it impossible to accept that the profound dimension of pain and suffering is the measure of the cost of creation through creaturely freedom.”

He acknowledges that those who have “no positive ground for religious belief within their own experience” often do see such factors as “insuperable barriers”
to religious belief. But given the ambiguous nature of the evidence, he argues, it cannot be demonstrated that all rational people must see it this way. That is, belief in a supernatural realm can’t be shown to be any less plausible than disbelief. Accordingly, he concludes, “those who actually participate in this field of religious experience are fully entitled, as sane and rational persons, to take the risk of trusting their own experience together with that of their tradition, and of proceeding to live and to believe on the basis of it, rather than taking the alternative risk of distrusting it and so—for the time being at least—turning their backs on God.”

But why choose pluralism as the best religious hypothesis? Why does Hick believe we ought not be exclusivists? It is not because he sees exclusivism as incoherent. It is certainly possible, he grants, that “one particular ‘Ptolomaic’ religious vision does correspond uniquely with how things are.” Nor does Hick claim to have some privileged “cosmic vantage point from which [he can] observe both the divine reality in itself and the different partial human awarenesses of that reality.” But when we individually consider the evidence in the case, he argues, the result is less ambiguous. When “we start from the phenomenological fact of the various forms of religious experience, and we seek an hypothesis which will make sense of this realm of phenomena” from a religious point of view, “the theory that most naturally suggests itself postulates a divine Reality which is itself limitless, exceeding the scope of human conceptuality and language, but which is humanly thought and experienced in various conditioned and limited ways.”

What is this evidence which makes the pluralistic hypothesis so “considerably more probable” than exclusivism? For one thing, Hick informs us, a credible religious hypothesis must account for the fact, “evident to ordinary people (even though not always taken into account by theologians) that in the great majority of cases—say 98 to 99 percent—the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born.” Moreover, a credible hypothesis must account for the fact that within all of the major religious traditions, “basically the same salvific process is taking place, namely the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.” And while pluralism “illuminates” these otherwise baffling facts, the strict exclusivist’s view “has come to seem increasingly implausible and unrealistic.”

But even more importantly, he maintains, a credible religious hypothesis must account for the fact, of which “we have become irreversibly aware in the present century, as the result of anthropological, sociological and psychological studies and the work philosophy of language, that there is no one universal and invariable” pattern for interpreting human experience, but rather a range of significantly different patterns or conceptual schemes “which have developed within the major cultural streams.” And when considered in light of this, Hick concludes, a “pluralistic theory becomes inevitable.”
There are two basic ways in which Hick’s pluralistic position can be critiqued. One “appropriate critical response,” according to Hick himself, “would be to offer a better [religious] hypothesis.”20 That is, one way to challenge Hick is to claim that the evidence he cites is better explained by some form of exclusivism.

But there is another, potentially more powerful type of objection, one which finds its roots in the currently popular ‘Reformed Epistemology’ being championed by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga. I will first briefly outline Plantinga’s latest version of this epistemological approach and then discuss its impact on Hick’s position.

According to Plantinga, it has been widely held since the Enlightenment that if theistic beliefs—e.g., religious hypotheses—are to be considered rational, they must be based on propositional evidence. It is not enough for the theist just to refute objections to any such belief. The theist “must also have something like an argument for the belief, or some positive reason to think that the belief is true.”21 But this is incorrect, Plantinga maintains. There are beliefs which acquire their warrant propositionally—i.e., have warrant conferred on them by an evidential line of reasoning from other beliefs. And for such beliefs, it may well be true that proponents need something like an argument for their veridicality.

However, there are also, he tells us, basic beliefs which are not based on propositional evidence and, thus, do not require propositional warrant. In fact, if such beliefs can be affirmed “without either violating an epistemic duty or displaying some kind of noetic defect,” they can be considered properly basic.22 And, according to Plantinga, many theistic beliefs can be properly basic: “Under widely realized conditions it is perfectly rational, reasonable, intellectually respectable and acceptable to believe [certain theistic tenets] without believing [them] on the basis of [propositional] evidence.”23

But what are such conditions? Under what conditions can a belief have positive epistemic status if it is not conferred by other propositions whose epistemic status is not in question? The answer, Plantinga informs us, lies in an analysis of belief formation.

[We have] cognitive faculties designed to enable us to achieve true beliefs with respect to a wide variety of propositions—propositions about our immediate environment, about our interior lives, about the thoughts and experiences of other persons, about our universe at large, about right and wrong, about the whole realm of abstracta—numbers, properties, propositions, states of affairs, possible worlds and their like,
about modality—what is necessary and possible—and about [ourselves]. These faculties work in such a way that under the appropriate circumstances we form the appropriate belief. More exactly, the appropriate belief is *formed in us*; in the typical case we do not *decide* to hold or form the belief in question, but simply find ourselves with it. Upon considering an instance of *modus ponens*, I find myself believing its corresponding conditional; upon being appeared to in the familiar way, I find myself holding the belief that there is a large tree before me; upon being asked what I had for breakfast, I reflect for a moment and find myself with the belief that what I had was eggs on toast. In these and other cases I do not *decide* what to believe; I don't total up the evidence (I'm being appeared to redly; on most occasions when thus appeared to I am in the presence of something red, so most probably in this case I am) and make a decision as to what seems best supported; I simply find myself believing. ²⁴

And from a theistic point of view, Plantinga continues, the same is true in the religious realm. Just as it is true that when our senses or memory is functioning properly, “appropriate belief is formed in us,” so it is that God has created us with faculties which will, “when they are working the way they were designed to work by the being who designed and created us and them,” produce true theistic beliefs. ²⁵ Moreover, if these faculties are functioning properly, a basic belief thus formed has “positive epistemic status to the degree [the individual in question finds herself] inclined to accept it.” ²⁶

What, though, of the alleged counter-evidence to such theistic beliefs? What, for example, of all the arguments the conclusion of which is that God does not exist? Can they all be dismissed as irrelevant? Not immediately, answers Plantinga. We must seriously consider potential defeaters of our basic beliefs. With respect to the belief that God exists, for example, we must seriously consider the claim that religious belief is mere wish fulfillment and the claim that God’s existence is incompatible with (or at least improbable given) the amount of evil in the world.

But to undercut such defeaters, he continues, we need not engage in positive apologetics: produce propositional evidence for our beliefs. We need only engage in negative apologetics: refute such arguments. ²⁷ Moreover, it is Plantinga’s conviction that such defeaters do normally exist. “The nonpropositional warrant enjoyed by [a person’s] belief in God, for example, [seems] itself sufficient to turn back the challenge offered by some alleged defeaters”—e.g., the claim that theistic belief is mere wish fulfillment. And other defeaters such as the “problem of evil” he tells us, can be undercut by identifying validity or soundness problems or even by appealing to the fact that “experts think it unsound or that the experts
are evenly divided as to its soundness."\textsuperscript{28}

Thus, not surprisingly, he concludes that, even considering all the alleged counter-evidence, there is little reason to believe that many theistic beliefs cannot be considered properly basic for most adult theists—even intellectually sophisticated adult theists.

Do Plantinga or other proponents of this Reformed epistemology maintain that their exclusivistic religious hypotheses are properly basic and can thus be ‘defended’ in the manner just outlined? I am not \textit{certain} that they do. However, when Plantinga, for example, claims that “God exists” is for most adult theists properly basic, he appears to have in mind a classical Christian conception of the divine—i.e., a being who is the triune, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, \textit{ex nihilo} creator of the universe. In fact, given his recent claim that “the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit . . . is a source of reliable and perfectly acceptable beliefs about what is communicated [by God] in Scripture,” and the manner in which most who make such a claim view the truth claims of the other world religions, it would appear that Plantinga’s ‘basic’ conception of God is quite exclusive.\textsuperscript{29}

However, even if no Reformed epistemologist actually does affirm an exclusivistic hypothesis she claims is properly basic, it is obvious that the Reformed analysis of belief justification can be used to critique Hick’s line of reasoning. Hick claims that an objective inductive assessment of the relevant evidence makes his pluralistic thesis a more plausible religious explanation than any of the competing exclusivistic hypotheses. But a Reformed exclusivist could easily argue that this approach to the issue is misguided. My affirmation of an exclusivistic Christian perspective, such an argument might begin, is not evidential in nature. It is, rather, simply a belief I have found formed in me, much like the belief that I am seeing a tree in front of me or the belief that killing innocent children is wrong.

Now, of course, I must seriously consider the allegedly formidable defeaters with which pluralists such as Hick have presented me. I must consider the fact, for example, that the exclusive beliefs simply formed in most people are not similar to mine, but rather tend to mirror those beliefs found in the cultures in which such people have been raised. But I do not agree with Hick that this fact is best explained by a pluralistic hypothesis. I attribute this phenomenon to other factors such as the epistemic blindness with which much of humanity has been plagued since the fall.\textsuperscript{30}

Moreover, to defend my position—to maintain justifiably (rationally) that I am right and Hick is wrong—I need not, as Hick seems to suggest, produce objective ‘proof’ that his hypothesis is weaker than mine. That is, I need not produce ‘evidence’ that would lead most rational people to agree with me. That would be to involve myself in Classical Foundationalism, which is increasingly
being recognized as a bankrupt epistemological methodology. All I need do is undercut Hick’s defeaters—i.e., show that his challenge does not require me to abandon my exclusivity thesis. And this I can easily do. For Hick has not demonstrated that my thesis is self-contradictory. And it is extremely doubtful that there exists any other nonquestion-begging criterion for plausibility by which he could even attempt to demonstrate that my thesis is less plausible (less probable) than his.

Hick, of course, believes firmly that his hypothesis makes the most sense. But why should this bother me? By his own admission, many individuals firmly believe that, given the amount of seemingly gratuitous evil in the world, God’s nonexistence is by far most plausible. Yet this does not keep him from affirming theism. He simply reserves the right to see things differently and continues to believe. And there is no reason why I cannot do the same.

Moreover, even if what others believed were relevant, by Hick’s own admission, the majority of theists doubt that his thesis is true.31 Or, at the very least, I could rightly maintain that “the experts are evenly divided as to its soundness.” Thus, given the criteria for defeater assessment which we Reformed exclusivists affirm, Hick’s defeaters are clearly undercut. And, accordingly, I remain perfectly justified in continuing to hold that my exclusivity thesis is correct and, therefore, that all incompatible competing hypotheses are false.

A Middle Ground

It is tempting to see Hick and the Reformed exclusivist as espousing incompatible approaches to the question of religious diversity. If Hick is correct—if the issue is primarily evidential in nature—then the Reformed exclusivist is misguided and vice versa. But this, I believe, is an inaccurate assessment of the situation. There are two equally important, but distinct, questions which arise in this context, and Hick and the Reformed exclusivist, it seems to me, each primarily address only one.

The Reformed exclusivist is primarily interested in the following question:

Q1: Under what conditions is an individual within her epistemic rights (is she rational) in affirming one of the many mutually exclusive religious diversity hypotheses?

In response, as we have seen, the Reformed exclusivist argues (or at least could argue) that a person need not grant that her religious hypothesis (belief) requires propositional (evidential) warrant. She is within her epistemic rights in maintaining that it is a basic belief. And if she does so, then to preserve rationality, she is not required to ‘prove’ in some objective manner that her hypothesis is most plausible. She is fulfilling all epistemic requirements solely by defending
her hypothesis against claims that it is less plausible than competitors.

It seems to me that the Reformed exclusivist is basically right on this point. I do believe, for reasons mentioned later in this essay, that attempts by any knowledgeable exclusivist to defend her hypothesis will ultimately require her to enter the realm of positive apologetics—i.e., will require her to engage in a comparative analysis of her exclusivistic beliefs. But I wholeheartedly agree with the Reformed exclusivist’s contention that to preserve rationality, she need not actually demonstrate that her hypothesis is most plausible. She need ultimately only defend herself against the claim that a thoughtful assessment of the matter makes the affirmation of some incompatible perspective—i.e., pluralism or some incompatible exclusivistic perspective—the only rational option. And this, I believe, she can clearly do.

What this means, of course, is that if Hick is actually arguing that pluralism is the only rational option, then I think he is wrong. And his claim that pluralism “is considerably more probable” than exclusivism does, it must be granted, make it appear as if he believes pluralism to be the only hypothesis a knowledgeable theist can justifiably affirm.

But Hick never actually calls his opponents irrational in this context. That is, while Hick clearly believes that sincere, knowledgeable exclusivists are wrong, he has never to my knowledge claimed that they are guilty of violating the basic epistemic rules governing rational belief. Accordingly, it seems best to assume that Q1—a concern with what can be rationally affirmed—is not Hick’s primary interest in this context.

But what then is it with which Hick is concerned? As we have seen, Q1 is defensive in nature. It asks for identification of conditions under which we can justifiably continue to affirm a belief we already hold. But why hold the specific religious beliefs we desire to defend? Why, specifically, choose to defend religious pluralism rather than exclusivism or vice versa? Or, to state this question of ‘belief origin’ more formally:

Q2: Given that an individual can be within her epistemic rights (can be rational) in affirming either exclusivism or pluralism, upon what basis should her actual choice be made?

This is the type of question in which I believe Hick is primarily interested.

Now, it might be tempting for a Reformed exclusivist to contend that she is exempt from the consideration of Q2. As I see it, she might begin, this question is based on the assumption that individuals consciously choose their religious belief systems. But the exclusivistic hypothesis which I affirm was not the result of a conscious attempt to choose the most plausible option. I have simply discovered this exclusivistic hypothesis formed in me in much the same fashion I find my visual and moral beliefs just formed in me. And thus Hick’s question
is simply irrelevant to my position.

But such a response will not do. There is no reason to deny that Reformed exclusivists do have, let’s say, a Calvinistic religious hypothesis just formed in them. However, although almost everyone in every culture does in the appropriate context have similar ‘tree-beliefs’ just formed in them, there is no such unanimity within the religious realm. As Hick rightly points out, the religious belief that the overwhelming majority of people in any given culture find just formed in them is the dominant hypothesis of that culture or subculture. Moreover, the dominant religious hypotheses in most of these cultures are exclusivistic—i.e., incompatible with one another.

Accordingly, it seems to me that Hick can rightly be interpreted as offering the following challenge to the knowledgeable Reformed exclusivist (the exclusivist aware of pervasive religious diversity): I will grant that your exclusivistic beliefs were not originally the product of conscious deliberation. But given that most sincere theists initially go through a type of religious belief-forming process similar to yours and yet usually find formed in themselves the dominant exclusivistic hypotheses of their own culture, upon what basis can you justifiably continue to claim that the hypothesis you affirm has some special status just because you found it formed in you? Or, to state the question somewhat differently, Hick’s analysis of religious diversity challenges knowledgeable Reformed exclusivists to ask themselves why they now believe that their religious belief-forming mechanisms are functioning properly while the analogous mechanisms in all others are faulty.

Some Reformed exclusivists, as we have seen, have a ready response. Because of ‘the fall,’ they maintain, most individuals suffer from religious epistemic blindness—i.e., do not possess properly functioning religious belief-forming mechanisms. Only our mechanisms are trustworthy. However, every exclusivistic religious tradition can—and many do—make such claims. Hence, an analogous Hickian question again faces knowledgeable Reformed exclusivists: Why do you believe that only those religious belief-forming mechanisms which produce exclusivistic beliefs compatible with yours do not suffer from epistemic blindness?

Reformed exclusivists cannot at this point argue that they have found this belief just formed in them for it is now the reliability of the belief-forming mechanism, itself, which is being questioned. Nor, since they are anti-foundationists, can Reformed exclusivists argue that the evidence demonstrates conclusively that their position is correct. So upon what then can they base their crucial belief that their religious belief-forming mechanisms alone produce true beliefs?

They must, it seems to me, ultimately fall back on the contention that their belief-forming mechanisms can alone be trusted because that set of beliefs thus generated appears to them to form the most plausible religious explanatory
hypothesis available. But to respond in this fashion brings them into basic methodological agreement with Hick’s position on Q2. That is, it appears that knowledgeable Reformed exclusivists must ultimately maintain with Hick that when attempting to discover which of the many self-consistent hypotheses that can rationally be affirmed is the one that ought to be affirmed, a person must finally decide which hypothesis she believes best explains the phenomena. Or, to state this important point differently yet, what Hick’s analysis of religious diversity demonstrates, I believe, is that even for those knowledgeable Reformed exclusivists who claim to find their religious perspectives just formed in them, a conscious choice among competing religious hypotheses is ultimately called for.

This is not to say, it must again be emphasized, that such Reformed exclusivists must attempt to ‘prove’ their choice is best. But, given the culturally relative nature of religious belief-forming mechanisms, a simple appeal to such a mechanism seems inadequate as a basis for such exclusivists to continue to affirm their perspective. It seems rather that knowledgeable exclusivists must ultimately make a conscious decision whether to retain the religious hypothesis that has been formed in them or choose another. And it further appears that they should feel some prima facie obligation to consider the available options—consciously consider the nature of the various religious hypotheses formed in people—before doing so.

Now, of course, to agree that such a comparative analysis should be undertaken is not to say that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis is, in fact, the most plausible alternative. I agree with the Reformed exclusivist that ‘plausibility’ is a very subjective concept. Thus, I doubt that the serious consideration of the competing explanatory hypotheses for religious phenomena, even by knowledgeable, open-minded individuals, will produce consensus.

However, I do not see this as in any sense diminishing the importance of engaging in the type of comparative analysis suggested. For even if such comparative assessment will not lead to consensus, it will produce two significant benefits. First, only by such assessment, I feel, can a person acquire ‘ownership’ of her religious hypothesis. That is, only by such an assessment can she insure herself that her belief is not solely the product of environmental conditioning. Second, such an assessment should lead all concerned to be more tolerant of those with which they ultimately disagree. And in an age where radical religious exclusivism again threatens world peace, I believe such tolerance to be of inestimable value.

This does not mean, let me again emphasize in closing, that the consideration of Q1—the consideration of the conditions under which a religious hypothesis can be rationally affirmed—is unimportant or even less important than the consideration of Q2. It is crucial that we recognize who must actually shoulder the ‘burden of proof’ in this context. And we need to thank Reformed exclusivists
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for helping us think more clearly about this matter. But I fear that a preoccupation with Q1 can keep us from seeing the importance of Q2—the consideration of the basis upon which we choose the hypothesis to be defended—and the comparative assessment of hypotheses to which such consideration leads us. And we need to thank pluralists such as Hick for drawing our attention to this fact.

Roberts Wesleyan College

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 491.
4. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 67.
9. Ibid., p. 34.
10. Ibid., pp. 64, 100.
11. Ibid., p. 100.
12. Ibid., p. 67.
18. Hick, God Has Many Names, p. 49.
22. Ibid., p. 300.
25. Ibid., p. 411.
26. Ibid., p. 410.
28. Ibid., p. 312.