

DENVER SEMINARY

THE MYSTERY OF GOD INCARNATE:  
AN ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF JOHN HICK'S CHRISTOLOGY

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“If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions.”

John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”

John the apostle

## INTRODUCTION

### **Christianity and the Diversity of Religions**

Historical Christianity has held, as a fundamental tenet, that there is one and only one way to reach God: through its founder, Jesus of Nazareth. If everyone in the world believed accordingly, there would be no reason to bring this into question. We find, however, a variety of religious beliefs to the contrary. So, it would be appropriate to bring this fundamental tenet of historical Christianity under closer scrutiny. From its beginning, Christianity has been challenged by other religions who oppose its message of salvation in Jesus alone. Some see Christianity's exclusive claims to be brimming with arrogance and error, while others respond with polite tolerance or ignore the problems altogether.

The relationship historical Christianity has to other world religions has provoked an abundance of literature in the past two decades. Three viewpoints have developed which serve to categorize Christianity's relationship to other faiths: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. *Exclusivism* is the position that the essential defining beliefs of a particular religion are true and religious beliefs to the contrary are to be rejected as false. For Christianity this would mean that the truth-claims of Jesus of Nazareth are unique and definitive for all people everywhere and at all times and that salvation is found in no one else. This has been the predominant position of the Christian Church since its beginning (Acts 4:12).

*Inclusivism* maintains that while some of the defining beliefs of one religion are true for all people, God is said to be revealing himself in other religions providing salvation/liberation to them as well. Christianity may in some sense be superior to all other religions, but salvific truths are made available in other faiths apart from any explicit response to the *kerygma* of Christianity. Karl Rahner's idea of the "anonymous Christian" and the documents of Vatican II are among the most influential writings for inclusivism.<sup>1</sup> For those in other religions who seek a

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<sup>1</sup>See "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 115-134; "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 390-398; "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12 (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 161-178; A. P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 367.

better existence in the next life, there are more ways than one to attain this. The inclusivist would say Christ saves ontologically, whether people explicitly know this or not. Only, specific beliefs regarding Jesus of Nazareth are not an essential part of the salvific process.

*Pluralism* is the belief that of the major world religions, no one is superior to any other. The major world religions are on common ground in that they all refer to the same religious Reality. Though they may differ in their essential beliefs, the great religious traditions are all equally legitimate responses to the same religious Real. While principles and practices may be established within a particular religion which are normative for a particular culture, these are not definitive for all people everywhere. Hence, each of the world religions are historically and culturally conditioned responses to the same religious Ultimate.

More often than not, pluralism begins with the phenomenology of religions. Rather than beginning with a philosophy of religion (truth criteria, religious experiences, metaphysical theories, principles of credulity and verifiability, etc.), pluralism begins with the empirical observation of religion. Since there are a variety of religions that appear to conflict, the pluralist gathers divergent beliefs of all religions and places them under the same umbrella. Seeing the dilemma of maintaining either (a) one religion is true and all others false or (b) all religions are false, pluralists have come to develop a vigorous epistemological stance that (c) all religions are true—it simply remains to be shown how.

Enter, John Hick. As the most ardent defender of religious pluralism, Hick has written a comprehensive justification of religious pluralism.<sup>2</sup> *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* is his most recent attempt to defend religious pluralism and break down the traditional belief that Jesus of Nazareth is literally God Incarnate. This effort seeks to show that Christian exclusivism cannot rationally be held, given the plurality of religious expressions in the world and the supposed incoherence of the classical doctrine of the Incarnation.

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<sup>2</sup>John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

John Hick's views are appealing for several reasons. First, if he is correct in his basic thesis that all religions are historically and culturally conditioned responses to the same divine reality, then people everywhere may eventually come to accept and affirm all religious differences. Despite all the historical evidence to the contrary, it is logically possible that men and women across the globe might accept Hick's views over and above the views of any one particular religion. Second, inter-religious cooperation could change economic, political, and ideological structures resulting in a world community of unprecedented global peace. Third, religious pluralism would popularize rather than polarize religion, offering a world theology—one in which all religious expressions encompass the same religious Ultimate.<sup>3</sup> Of course, not everyone may agree on what the religious Ultimate looks like metaphysically or soteriologically. Consequently, a thorough-going religious pluralism could not promote a unified religious world view.

### **Jesus as God? Problems for Religious Pluralism**

The basis for the superiority of Christianity, according to Hick, is that it was founded by God himself. But if it can be shown that the traditional dogma of the incarnation of God in Jesus is without meaning, anachronistic, and the cause of great evil in the world, then it follows that Christianity is merely one of a number of authentic human responses to the religious Ultimate. Hick reinterprets Christian history to fit the facts of religious pluralism by demonstrating that God is, to some extent, metaphorically incarnate in the lives of those who are doing his will. God is at all times "Immanuel," or God with us, albeit in the life of Jesus he was so in a "specially powerful and effective way."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the tenacity of John Hick's religious pluralism, the exclusive claims of Jesus, Scripture, and historical Christianity remain. The primary issue is whether Jesus is literally God

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<sup>3</sup>See esp. John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 77-101. Also, see John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster, 1994), 12-14, 150-164.

<sup>4</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 9.

Incarnate. If he is, then the exclusive claims he made are true and the New Testament is correct in its assertions. And if the early Christian Church was correct in its interpretations of the Bible, then religious pluralism, as John Hick has explicated, is false.

My purpose for picking this topic is to confront recent challenges leveled against an incarnational Christology as affirmed in the fourth and fifth century Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. I will argue that John Hick's incarnational views are inadequate and result in: (1) an epistemological relativism because he has not sufficiently demonstrated how his views are to be preferred over historic Christianity; (2) a "degree Christology" that is incompatible with Jesus' own sayings, the testimony of Scripture, and historic orthodoxy; and (3) the demise of all religious truth because of his reductionistic view regarding the central claims of world religions.

It is reductionistic because Hick seeks to find the lowest common denominator in all the great religious traditions in an effort to bring them under his pluralistic hypothesis. The only way Hick can be successful at this is by reformulating the central claims that give the respective religions their identity. He thinks he can conserve the defining beliefs at the phenomenal level, but the result in doing so is the destruction of the traditions' defining beliefs. In contrast to Hick, I will offer a logically coherent Christian orthodoxy that is faithful to the central claims of Christianity as defined by the Scriptures and as interpreted by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451, viz., *that Jesus of Nazareth is the complete and final revelation of God in human form*. Though being faithful to the Scriptures and the Creeds does not necessitate a literal Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, I will demonstrate that an orthodox incarnational view of Jesus is far more plausible than Hick would have us think.

The fact that there are a plurality of world religions that contradict one another in their central truth claims does not destroy the notion of religious truth. That is, plurality does not entail pluralism. Moreover, the Christian Church developed in a milieu of religious beliefs ranging from the diverse Graeco-Roman world to strict Jewish monotheism. Still, the Christian Church has tenaciously held on to what it believes to be the religious truth of Jesus as literally God Incarnate.

From Arius in the fourth century to John Hick in the twentieth century, the incarnation of Jesus continues to be one of the most vexing challenges for historical Christianity. The Ecumenical Creed of Chalcedon is an affirmation of the historic Christian belief regarding the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Hick's earlier writing asserted that the language of Chalcedon does not explain anything regarding the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>5</sup> This is not entirely correct. Though Chalcedon took for granted that the terms used would be understood (as almost every historical document must do, lest it suffer the death of a thousand qualifications), it does provide a conceptual framework that can have explanatory value. Hick later admits that Chalcedon was meant to merely assert the belief that Jesus is literally God Incarnate and not to explain it. He goes on to define the orthodox task: "to spell out in an intelligible way the idea of someone having both a fully divine nature, i.e. having all the essential divine attributes, and at the same time a fully human nature, i.e. having all the essential human attributes."<sup>6</sup> This thesis will take up this task.

In chapter one I will lay out *what* Hick believes about Jesus of Nazareth. I will explicate Hick's incarnational views as they relate to the phenomenon of religious diversity. I will show that he believes the orthodox position of the Christian Church on the person of Christ is without meaning and should be discredited.

Chapter two will show *why* Hick believes Jesus is not literally God Incarnate. Though Hick's religious pluralism begins as a hypothesis, it will be demonstrated that it is a hypothesis with a purpose, viz., universal salvation. I will critique his understanding of salvation and show that his "broad-brush" approach results in meaningless talk and, ironically, is its own kind of exclusivism.

Chapter three will be an explication and critique of Hick's religious epistemology. The *noumena/phenomena* distinctions, as the philosophical basis for Hick's religious pluralism, will

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<sup>5</sup>John Hick, "An Inspirational Christology for a Religiously Plural World," in *Encountering Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>6</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 48.

be shown to result in a religious non-cognitivism or epistemological relativism, making Hick's idea of the religious Ultimate unnecessary.

In chapter four I will defend the coherence of a two-natures-two-minds-one-person Christology against Hick's challenges. There will be considerable interaction between Thomas V. Morris' *The Logic of God Incarnate* and Hick's *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. This chapter is intended to show the possibility of coherence in the classical view of Jesus and offer a brief defense of Chalcedon in its historical, grammatical, and philosophical context.

Chapter five will examine the biblical testimony of some of Jesus' titles. I will show that the Gospels are historically trustworthy documents and that Jesus thought of himself as divine. The appellations of Christ conferred upon him by others who knew him, as well as those he took for himself, are clear indications of both his deity and humanity. His identity and mission are integrated into his person and purpose, and it is the titles, above all else, that intimate his unique status as the God-Man.

Chapter six will be a summary and conclusion of my assessment of Hick's denial of Jesus as God Incarnate. I believe it is possible to hold a coherent view of Jesus having two natures without the problems entailed by any of the kenosis theories or the Nestorian heresy. I will argue for a biblically faithful, historically responsible, and logically coherent Christology that Jesus is the *Mystery of God Incarnate*.

## CHAPTER 1

## JOHN HICK'S CHRISTOLOGY

**Incarnation as Myth**

John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is carefully defined. He states that:

the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human, and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment.<sup>7</sup>

If Hick's hypothesis is true, then a reworking of all the world's major religions would be necessary. It would not be a matter of clarifying the central claims of, say, Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity, but rendering them wholly different. This is precisely what Hick seeks to do with the orthodox doctrine of Christ in Christianity.

According to John Hick the historical doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus "remains a form of words without assignable meaning."<sup>8</sup> Hick is so determined in his position that he asserts "any attempt to spell out the idea of divine incarnation as a metaphysical theory, rather than as religious metaphor or myth, is bound to be unacceptable or, in traditional terminology, heretical."<sup>9</sup> Given such conviction, it would indeed be difficult, if not impossible, to "spell out" a divine incarnational theory that is acceptable for those who seem to have rejected *a priori* the possibility of coherence. Nevertheless, it is important to explain Hick's view of incarnation as myth and see if it is any more tenable.

To begin with, John Hick has a very pragmatic, though quite vague, definition of myth. It is "a story or statement which is not literally true but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter . . . a true myth is one which rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms."<sup>10</sup> It would appear that

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<sup>7</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 240.

<sup>8</sup>John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), 178.

<sup>9</sup>John Hick, "The Logic of God Incarnate," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 409.

<sup>10</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 248.

“reality” is not an objective state of affairs, but subjective impressions left upon the person who seeks meaning in the myth. There is some objective referent in Hick’s idea of myth, but it is rather vague and obscure such that little, if anything, can be said about it. Moreover, myth is not so much descriptive of a possible state of affairs to which it points, rather evocative of something in the interpreter. As a result, the lines between meaning and significance virtually disappear. The meaning is the significance, rather than the meaning giving rise to the significance. For example, a mythological understanding of Jesus as an incarnation of God invites an appropriate response to his life and teaching as “saving”<sup>11</sup> in some sense. That is as much as one should come away with when reading the New Testament.

Furthermore, Hick states that a literal understanding of the incarnation of Jesus has “contributed historically to the evils of colonialism, the destruction of indigenous civilisations, anti-Semitism, destructive wars of religion and the burnings of heretics and witches.”<sup>12</sup> So, in addition to his pragmatic definition, Hick would also include in the idea of the myth of God incarnate only those consequences which have positive results. Therefore, the traditional dogma of a literal incarnation, according to Hick, must be false. This utilitarian stance makes for an interesting epistemological study (more on this later). However, Hick turns to the idea of *myth* as a more accurate understanding of the person of Jesus.

Essentially, Jesus Christ had an “extraordinary openness to the divine presence in virtue of which [his] life and teachings have mediated the reality and love of God to millions of people in successive centuries.”<sup>13</sup> The mythological idea of the incarnation of Jesus is “a way of saying that Jesus is our living contact with the transcendent God.”<sup>14</sup> Myth is simply an extended metaphor—an alternative way of communicating a non-literal truth. Examples that Hick cites are Winston Churchill incarnating the British will to resist Hitler or George Washington

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 172.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 372.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 74.

incarnating the spirit of American independence. Though historical realities behind each of these examples are complex, “the myths nevertheless have their degree, perhaps a high degree, of validity and truthfulness.”<sup>15</sup>

Having made a Copernican-like leap from a Christocentric faith to a Theocentric faith, the notion of a literal incarnation could not survive for Hick.<sup>16</sup> The uniqueness of Christ is found simply in his openness to God’s love. Therefore, a person is not justified in saying “Jesus is God” but in saying “Jesus is god-like.” A mythological Jesus is one who evokes a particular human response. He is not one who should be worshipped as God.

### **Incarnation as Metaphor**

Hick makes it abundantly clear in his latest work that Jesus incarnates God metaphorically, rather than literally.<sup>17</sup> This is simply another attempt at fleshing out the idea of incarnation as myth. Since Hick claims the incarnation of Jesus is myth, and a myth is an extended metaphor, then it begs the question: “What is a metaphor?” This is the question Hick attempts to answer. Not only is *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* a response to Morris’ *The Logic of God Incarnate*,<sup>18</sup> but Hick significantly interacts with the concept of metaphor in an attempt to substantiate his Christological claims.

In a chapter entitled “Divine Incarnation as Metaphor,”<sup>19</sup> Hick first gives some generalities on the meaning and uses of metaphor. He then turns to the idea of incarnation and admits it began with the Fourth Gospel (*Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο*, John 1:14). He goes so far as to say that the author of the Gospel intended to intimate that Jesus was God the Son.<sup>20</sup> But,

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<sup>15</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 105.

<sup>16</sup>John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1973; reprint ed., London: Collins-Fontana, 1977), 131.

<sup>17</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 12; 99-111.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>19</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 99-111.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 101.

he dismisses the Fourth Gospel as an accurate account of what Jesus thought of himself—it is an elaboration upon a story developed through the decades.

Hick moves on to St. Athanasius' description of how the divine mind resides in a human body. He is quick to point out, rightly, that this may show how Jesus was divine, but is inadequate in showing how he was human. "A human body inhabited by the divine mind of God would not count as a genuine human being,"<sup>21</sup> since *humanness* entails having a human mind. In previous chapters he pointed to the inconsistencies of a two-natures-two-minds Christology and the failings of variations of the kenotic theories. Therefore, Hick employs metaphor as the only means of explaining the notion of divine incarnation.

Despite Hick's persistent interaction with the possibilities of a literal incarnation, I believe he gives up too easily. In chapter four of this thesis the problems with Hick's responses to a two-natures-two-minds-one-person Christology will be addressed. Suffice it to say that for one person to have a human mind or consciousness does not preclude the possibility of possessing a divine mind or consciousness at the same time. Much of this will turn on Hick's view of "mind."

As evidenced in Hick's writing, he sees the incarnation of Jesus from only one angle. It would be just as irresponsible, according to Hick, for one to say the incarnation of Jesus has no meaning as it would be to say it has a literal meaning. Therefore, the only option left is to assign the incarnation a metaphorical meaning. It would appear, though, that Hick's definition of myth and metaphor is primarily in terms of function, viz., the significance or effect of the metaphor. "The idea of the incarnation of God in the life of Jesus . . . is thus not a metaphysical claim about Jesus having two natures, but a metaphorical statement of the significance of a life through which God was acting on earth."<sup>22</sup>

It is difficult to see how Hick has avoided metaphysical claims altogether. If Jesus was a "life through which God was acting," then there is, at least, a human Jesus, a divine God, and

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 106.

some noteworthy relationship between them. Certain notions of the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the connection between them is presupposed before a statement such as this could even be made. Granted, Hick is seeking to avoid a “metaphysical claim *about Jesus having two natures*,” his employment of metaphor does nothing to clear the fog and is an extremely cryptic manner of explicating the nature of Jesus of Nazareth.

“Divine Incarnation as Metaphor” concludes by suggesting an inspirational Christology whereby Jesus’ life is set forth merely as an example for others to follow. The record of his life is not the sum total of what is recorded in the Gospel accounts. Even all four Gospel records, according to Hick, could not have encompassed more than three weeks of his life (save the forty days in the wilderness), leaving the majority of Jesus’ life unrecorded. Hick also asserts it would be extremely difficult to establish “on historical grounds that Jesus was perfectly sinless, or that he always lived in perfect response to God, or that he was in all respects morally and spiritually superior to every other human being who has ever lived.”<sup>23</sup>

*The Metaphor of God Incarnate* culminates with three reasons why the incarnation of Jesus should not be taken literally: “[it] lacks a secure historical basis in the teachings of Jesus; the attempts to make it conceptually intelligible have so far failed; and, further, it has been tainted by its use to justify enormous human evils.”<sup>24</sup> This is Hick’s *raison d’être*. Of course, what determines a “secure historical basis” and conceptual intelligibility is not entirely up to John Hick; ultimately it is the business of history and philosophy.

There are many good things that have been used to impose evil on the world. The use of weapons, for example, used to legitimately protect a nation also have been used to bring great evil (e.g., Hiroshima). Simply because evil results from an abuse of things or ideas, does not jettison all the good that has come about. This “red herring” is an attempt to divert attention from all the good that Christianity has done. Though this line of argumentation may have

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 162.

emotive appeal, a “straw man” cannot stand against a fair and reasonable glance at history. Hick would have to show a necessary connection between historic, orthodox Christianity and evil, and, to my knowledge, he has not done this.

### **Jesus: Different in Degree or Kind?**

Since Hick thinks that no one has adequately explained the idea of a literal incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, Hick turns from a substance Christology to a degree Christology. If Jesus of Nazareth was not literally God Incarnate but is metaphorically an incarnation of God, then another significant question arises: “In what manner or to what extent was Jesus metaphorically God incarnate?” In a letter to the editor of *Theology*, Hick answers: “Incarnation then becomes a matter of degree: God is incarnate in all men in so far as they are Spirit-filled, or Christ-like, or truly saintly.”<sup>25</sup> He admits that the concept of degree Christology was developed later as “alternatives to the old substance Christology.”<sup>26</sup> That is, since the accepted orthodox position of the Christian Church for more than fifteen centuries regarding the person of Jesus of Nazareth could not be adequately explained, a new theory arose to accommodate human understanding.

Hick saw in a degree Christology “the possibility of seeing God’s activity in Jesus as being of the same kind as God’s activity in other great human mediators of the divine.”<sup>27</sup> So he furthers his campaign against the superiority of Christianity over other world religions. After all, if Jesus is the *supreme* instance of the highest attainable degree of divinity, it would still remain to be established by historical evidence. We simply do not “know enough about the inner and outer life of the historical Jesus, and of the other founders of great religious traditions, to be

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<sup>25</sup>John Hick, “Letter to the Editors: Incarnation,” *Theology* 80 (May 1977): 204-206.

<sup>26</sup>John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), 36.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

able to make any such claim.”<sup>28</sup> However, Hick must know enough to say that Jesus of Nazareth is a worthy example of the heavenly Father’s love!<sup>29</sup>

Hick elaborates upon the idea of incarnation as myth by including the concept of differing degrees, dimensions, or intensities of Jesus’ favorable reaction to divine promptings. At this point, Hick’s myth is advancing metaphysical claims. He presupposes certain ontological distinctives between Jesus and other humans, yet these are merely a matter of “how much” receptivity or openness to divine activity. “For we are no longer speaking of an intersection of the divine and the human which only occurs in one unique case, but of an intersection which occurs, in many different ways and degrees, in all openness and response to the divine initiative.”<sup>30</sup>

But, what exactly are the criteria for being open to divine activity? Is the atheistic Buddhist and the monotheistic Muslim equally open to the divine initiative? How can we know for sure that the promptings are divine and not demonic? How much openness is enough before we recognize the threshold between being open and closed? Hick does nothing to spell this out, at which point his Christology becomes questionable, since he argues from silence. Chapters four and five will expand this further.

Meanwhile, it seems that Jesus’ human response to the divine will is the means whereby Hick finds Jesus to incarnate divine qualities. This significantly accommodates a theory of religious pluralism in that founders of other religions can also have “authentic” responses to the divine. A degree Christology “seeks Jesus’ divinity through his humanity, and then defines his uniqueness only in terms of a difference of degree rather than of kind.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Cf., John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1988), 225.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>31</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *The Identity of Jesus of Nazareth* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 75.

## Critique

Christology was progressive in nature and, according to Hick, may have begun with the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, but did not end there. As Jesus' followers began to make sense out of their perceptions of him, their religious experience eventually eclipsed the historical Jesus altogether. Therefore, what could be said reliably of him was minimal. The starting point for the disciples' understanding of Jesus was not so much his person or teachings, but their religious experiences of him. Hick's understanding is that early Christian testimonies regarding the person of Jesus are, at best, human attempts to develop beliefs in accordance with their religious experiences of him. It was the experience that was meaningful, not the person or event to which the experience points. But, according to biblical testimony, religious experiences can generate reliable propositions that correspond to reality and which are not merely subjective human responses (cf., Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 John 1:1-4; Rev. 1:12-18).

John Hick's view of divine incarnation as myth/metaphor is mistaken at several fundamental levels. First, he maintains there have been no adequate and acceptable explanations of a literal divine incarnation of Jesus and concludes that it is a false belief. However, not having an adequate explanation *at this time* does not entail the falsity of propositions such as "Jesus of Nazareth is fully human and fully divine." Hick maintains it is logically incoherent, *because* no defense has yet been offered that is adequate. But is it fair to make such a leap?

The primary contention of Hick is that the Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, classically conceived by Christianity, did not occur because he finds the concept contradictory. Chapter four will elucidate this issue more fully, but suffice it to say here that it isn't contradictory just because Hick doesn't see how Jesus can be both human and divine simultaneously. Hick goes too far in finding the historical, orthodox view of a literal incarnation false, then positing an alternative view of myth or metaphor that appears just as opaque as the view he refutes. Simply because the incarnation of Jesus has not been adequately spelled out to Hick's satisfaction does not entail its falsity, nor the need for an alternative view. Maybe a closer

look at the historical, orthodox view is necessary. In chapter three I will set forth a critique of Hick's religious epistemology, then offer a coherent view of Jesus as both fully God and fully man that is compatible with the orthodox position of Chalcedon.

Second, Hick asserts that John's incarnated Logos is a late interpolation of what had been developing for decades. But what about Matthew's Immanuel? According to Hick, God is always with us. Yet, Matthew said what he meant: *the child Jesus* was "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Of course, Hick would say that Jesus was metaphorically "God with us." But this line of reasoning could work both ways. It could equally be said that John's incarnated Word is Matthew's Immanuel. That is, a literal incarnated Word could also be the literal child born to the virgin Mary in Bethlehem. This would be the most natural way to read Matthew 1:23 and John 1:14. But Hick superimposes his idea of metaphor over Matthew and offers no historical, exegetical, or textual reasons for doing so. His only basis for disqualifying Matthew's account as a metaphysical statement is because he has already assumed a literal incarnation is incoherent. The burden of proof is on Hick to demonstrate that Matthew's Immanuel is merely a mythical expression of God's presence. Simply asserting it to be so doesn't make it so.

Third, if it is true that the record of Jesus' life only encompasses about three weeks and that we know very little about the rest of his life, how many would want to pattern their religious lives after one who could have lived an immoral life the rest of the time? Though Hick has not gone to this extreme, this minimalist view of Jesus is scanty evidence to go on if he was not literally God Incarnate.

Fourth, Hick posits that the entire New Testament record is a compilation of human attempts to describe the religious experiences of Jesus' followers. This is not denied. But, the Bible also contains a host of "secular" history, geography, etc. It's not just a spiritual autobiography! A human description of a religious experience could very well be describing something literal. Simply because it is "human" and an "experience" does not necessarily mean that what is being described is metaphorical or subjective. In other words, human language does not always end up as metaphor when pertaining to religious experience.

For example, the resurrection of Jesus is described as a religious experience but in literal terms. The resurrection, as a literal event, did produce religious experiences, but the experiences were not just images in the minds of those who thought they saw Jesus. They were subjective responses to something objectively there (John 20:28). Like the historian, the theologian or philosopher is not free to interpret the facts of experience as she or he likes. Religious experiences constitute something given, something there in time and space, and if the disciples' experience of the resurrected Christ is myth, then it ought to be rejected as false.

Fifth, Hick relies upon the phenomena of religion to define his metaphysical basis for religion. In doing so, he exposes his inductive and empirical commitments to reality. He grounds his epistemology in a quasi-Kantian distinction between an ineffable, unknowable Real *an sich* (a noumenal Real) and various phenomenal expressions of personal and impersonal conceptions of deity. Yet, he does not spell out adequately, in any coherent fashion, what is the nature of his Real *an sich*, other than the claim that the Real *an sich* is both personal and impersonal, One and Many. Is this any more acceptable than the two-natures-one-person Christology of Chalcedon? On what basis, then, does he turn to myth and metaphor to explain the person of Jesus? Chalcedonian Christology makes positive ontological claims, while Hick tries to escape all positive ontological claims regarding his Real *an sich*. Though he says the religions are justified in saying the Real is personal or impersonal at a phenomenological level, they just can't say the Real is personal/impersonal in-itself.<sup>32</sup>

If the metaphysical correlate or substance behind a myth is opaque beyond description, what does this do for the significance of the myth or metaphor? After all, a myth or metaphor necessarily points beyond itself. What does the signifier point to—a One or Many, personal or impersonal God? It seems that until Hick can explain his metaphysical bases in believable and rational terms, then myth and metaphor have very little explanatory power.

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<sup>32</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 350.

Nevertheless, an elusive metaphysic for the religious Ultimate does not stop Hick from assuming some kind of metaphysical basis for such notions as human finitude, a contingent universe, and life after death. In other words, some religious ideas can be so obviously factual and literal with a high degree of continuity between what is represented in language and an actual state of affairs. Other religious ideas (such as, a literal incarnation) become very fuzzy and ambiguous for Hick, to the extent that there is only that metaphysical basis behind a metaphor that fits comfortably with the notion of myth and metaphor.

Sixth, according to Hick, a myth is a representation of something real. Recall that his definition of a true myth is “one which rightly relates us to a reality.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, there is a correlation between myth and the reality it represents. Hick also claims that the Real *an sich* can be illustrated as the Buddhist notion of *Sunyata* which “provides a good symbol for the Real *an sich*.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Hick’s religious Ultimate is tantamount to an empty, undifferentiated No-thing. He finds affinities in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition because *Sunyata* is beyond the grasp of human concepts and distinctions. It is known only in its manifestations, and is, at least on this level, equivalent to his Real *an sich*.<sup>35</sup> If this is so, what happens to the pluralistic hypothesis of epistemic parity between the major world religions? It would seem that some notion of “better” entails the notion of “not as good as” which does not help Hick’s overall thesis.

Yet, symbols communicate some or all of the properties of some object (or person) and convey that content to a perceiving subject. And, if Hick’s Real *an sich* is an unknowable, empty, undifferentiated No-thing, then what could possibly be represented? Can there really be symbols for a No-thing? If Jesus symbolically represents Hick’s Real *an sich* and that Real *an sich* is non-representable, then what property(ies) is Jesus, or any religious figure, representing?

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<sup>33</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 248.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 246. Also, cf., *ibid.*, 291f.

<sup>35</sup>For some minor differences between the *Sunyata* and Hick’s Real *an sich* see *ibid.*, 291-292.

This, I believe, is an insoluble problem for Hick. If Jesus mythologically and/or metaphorically represents the Real *an sich*, and the Real *an sich* corresponds to that which is “beyond the net of concepts and distinctions,”<sup>36</sup> then Jesus is representing something which is non-representable! Hick claims that the *Sunyata*, as an “anti-concept,”<sup>37</sup> best represents his Real *an sich*. What exactly was Jesus open to? A void? Whatever he was open to, it must have been non-cognitive for Hick’s position to obtain.

Without concepts, though, there can be no intellectual content (more on this in chapter 3). Though God is incomparable (Is. 40:18), he can be contrasted with human ideas or categories. That is, if God is infinite, then he is not finite. If God is spirit, then he is non-corporeal. “Negative predication of God can only be informative if there is presupposed some identifiable positive knowledge of God.”<sup>38</sup> Otherwise, Jesus did not represent anything or anyone.

Seventh, Hick claims that only on the basis of “historical grounds” can one establish the character of Jesus of Nazareth, yet he dismisses the entire New Testament as reliable history. Moreover, if documentation of experiences are not to be considered as “historical grounds,” then most, if not all, of history should be discarded! That the New Testament writers documented their experiences does not preclude the possibility of those experiences being literally true.

Ironically, Hick has never been slow to admit the reliability of sense perception. He points to differing responses to Jesus claiming that he was an “objectively ambiguous phenomenon.”<sup>39</sup> . . . there were others [besides the disciples of Jesus] who, so far from experiencing Jesus as the Christ, perceived him as a powerful wonder-worker or a highly unorthodox rabbi or

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 291.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 246.

<sup>38</sup>Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 139.

<sup>39</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 156.

a potentially dangerous political leader. Thus the religious meaning of Jesus' life did not lie on the surface for all to see.<sup>40</sup>

But, Hick fails to demonstrate how these varied responses to Jesus “show” that he was ambiguous and that no response to him was proper. Incommensurable responses do not necessarily “show” anything but incommensurable responses. Hick indicates, at least implicitly, that there is one inappropriate response to Jesus that was *unambiguously* objective: that he was literally God Incarnate. Though Hick would deny the historical reliability of the Fourth Gospel (more on this later), this conveniently ignores the acclamation of Thomas (“my Lord, and my God”) during one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (John 20:28).

Furthermore, disagreement on the ascription of a person's properties does not necessarily render that person “objectively ambiguous.” For example, many people (approximately 900) believed Jim Jones to be the Messiah, while most of America rightly thought he was deluded. This disagreement would not make Jim Jones objectively ambiguous, and Hick would agree.<sup>41</sup> Though some persons may be esoteric or illusive, discrepancies in human perceptions of others does not entail objective ambiguity.

It must be remembered that Hick's position of Jesus being metaphorically God incarnate is because he deems a literal incarnation to be logically contradictory and never adequately explained. But, as Alister McGrath points out, Hick is committed to the belief that “all the concepts of God to be found in the world religions—personal, impersonal, immanent and transcendent—are compatible with each other.”<sup>42</sup> It remains puzzling that these opposing concepts can be plugged into a pluralistic hypothesis as being coherent, while the integration of divine and human properties into one person is not coherent.

Hick declares that the Christian Church is flagrantly inconsistent in holding to a divine-human person, while he mirrors the same inconsistency in his own system. He puts himself in a

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 217.

<sup>42</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God: and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 124-125.

position to know what it is that God can and cannot do with regard to a literal incarnation. Suddenly, Hick's ineffable, noumenal God became quite transparent.

Finally, Hick distinguishes between what he believes to be essential basic beliefs and "secondary interpretive theories such as that Jesus had two distinct natures, or that the Christian awareness of God is the only authentic awareness of God. These latter are theological theories which exceed the range of properly basic beliefs directly grounded in our experience."<sup>43</sup> His criteria for what is a "properly basic belief" is randomly selected, since he grounds it primarily in experience and dismisses any belief not in line with his pluralistic hypothesis.

John Hick's maneuver toward a "degree Christology" is not without its problems. Though he rejects the idea of Jesus' response to God as being unique and absolute, Hick sees an advantage of holding some form of a degree Christology for his religious pluralism. But this escapes the question of truth. The question to answer is not, "Does this idea fit within my theory," but "Is it true that Jesus was different only in degree and not in kind?" Of course, when the metaphysical claims regarding a literal incarnation already have been declared incoherent and false, then the issue of truth regarding the incarnation becomes *non sequitur*.

But, positing that Jesus only incarnated God to a degree seems inconsistent with the pluralistic hypothesis. Whenever a proposition is believed to be true (e.g., Jesus incarnated God only to a degree), it affirms the reality described in the proposition. Thus, a proposition excludes, by its nature, the opposite of that which it affirms (that is, Jesus incarnated God absolutely and completely). So, if Jesus only incarnated God to a degree, then he could not have incarnated God absolutely and completely. And, this is tantamount to the very exclusive truth-claims Hick takes such pains to avoid. Therefore, Hick's degree Christology is not significantly different than the exclusive truth-claims he denies. It only gives the appearance of being a more adequate proposal.

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<sup>43</sup>John Hick, "A Concluding Comment," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (October, 1988): 451.

Of course, Hick does allow for other metaphorical incarnations.<sup>44</sup> His goal is to discount the orthodox Incarnation as defined by Chalcedon. The logical possibility may exist for there to be a plurality of incarnations of God to a degree as Hick postulates, so long as each one is not contradicting another. But when alleged contradiction arises such as Paul's statement that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9), then we either have a grave misunderstanding or a genuine conflict to resolve. Hick's efforts at defending and documenting the misunderstandings is unsatisfactory and escapes the reality of the conflict. Appealing to myth or metaphor does not make the conflict disappear if the appeal is *ad hoc* or not properly defended.

The humanity of Jesus is the fundamental starting point of a degree Christology. It involves a man who is powerfully inspired by God, rather than God who is found in the form of a man (Phil. 2:5-8). It also denies that Jesus of Nazareth was pre-existent and reduces the life of Jesus to the subjective categories of phenomenological description. What can be known of the man Jesus is based solely upon the subjective responses of a few witnesses. And, at most, those responses are "objectively ambiguous."

A degree Christology is reductionistic. It diminishes the message of the New Testament to mere history that was religiously interpreted, and, therefore, not substantially different than any other historically religious event. Though it is true that the New Testament records history, it also includes a variety of miracles, such as the resurrection of Jesus. If some what can be known of God is based upon the phenomena of history, and Jesus rose from the dead in history, then one must consider this evidence as well. Yet, to my knowledge, in all of his writings John Hick conveniently overlooks the empty tomb of Christ as evidence for the resurrection. His degree Christology speaks in phenomenological terms, yet he selectively chooses which phenomena to consider.

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<sup>44</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 89-98.

In a degree Christology Jesus, along with other religious figures, is relativized. If he is different only to a degree from Buddha, Mohammed, etc., then what compelling reason does one have for believing Christianity is true? Similarly, was Jesus more or less inspired than, say, the Buddha? For Hick, the *Sunyata* is a good representation of the Real *an sich*. Yet, Jesus was a strict monotheist who believed in a substantial, personal, and ontologically distinct God. Is the *Sunyata* as good or better than Jesus' God? Maintaining the compatibility of these mutually exclusive metaphysical claims about the religious Ultimate is an impossible task. Unfortunately, Hick offers no basis for postulating that Yahweh and the *Sunyata* are the same metaphysical reality. Therefore, it is strictly an argument from silence.

The primary reason for anyone believing one religion over another is because it is believed to be *the* truth regarding salvation, not more true than others. It is true Hick does not make this claim, but what immediately follows is from a Christian viewpoint. While Judaism is more true than Advaita Vedanta Hinduism in the belief of one God who is creator of all, this truth does little to answer the existential needs and concerns of humanity. Still, some religions may contain more salvific truths than others. For example, Judaism has some soteriologically necessary truths (e.g., sinfulness of humanity, holiness of God), but these are not soteriologically *sufficient* truths. Judaism is still deficient because of its need for a perfect atonement for sin. Nevertheless, there are truth-claims (necessary conditions) a person must affirm in order to be saved. Orthodox Judaism may be miles ahead of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism with respect to soteriological truths, but lacks all the necessary and sufficient claims for salvation. Hence, one religion can be "more true" than another, but not more than one religion can be soteriologically effective.

The very basis upon which early Christians could claim that "Jesus is Lord" is because of their conviction that he has "the name that is *above* every name" (Phil. 2:9). A commitment to Jesus in the first century (and today) means that he does not win out by default as the best answer, but the *only* answer to the human predicament.

This simply is not acceptable for Hick. The metaphor of God incarnate merely explains the *significance* of Jesus, but does nothing to account satisfactorily for why the early Christian Church worshipped him as Lord. It is not *meaning*, according to Hick, but the *significance* which encapsulates the essence of metaphor. Metaphor then becomes simply the response it evokes, not to what it points.

Yet, this does nothing to explain *how* the metaphor evokes the attitude or disposition that Hick insists upon. There must be some “guiding cognitive features to which the emotive response is the response. We cannot conceive of emotive ‘import’ apart from a cognitive content which elicits it.”<sup>45</sup> So Loughlin rightly says: “if Jesus is in no sense the Son of God it is difficult if not impossible to understand why the attitude that such a statement might evoke could be in any sense appropriate to Jesus.”<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, Hick offers no reason why *his* metaphorical account of Jesus should be accepted over that of any other. The basis for his view of Jesus of Nazareth being the correct one is the unintelligibility of the traditional view. But, Hick has not adequately shown why it is that the traditional language of Nicea and Chalcedon *was* used. Could it be that what the Church said of the Incarnation was precisely what was believed to be literally true? Hick may grant this, but simply say that they were wrong, at which point he becomes a selective pluralist. However, “to confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son and Word of God, is to do more than merely express *that* he is important; it is to say *why* he is important.”<sup>47</sup>

The end result of Hick’s view of a literal incarnation is that it must be rejected as false, because it does not conform to his hypothesis of religious pluralism. By applying the notions of myth and metaphor to Jesus, Hick believes he has avoided the need for wrestling with

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<sup>45</sup>Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27.

<sup>46</sup>Gerard Loughlin, “Squares and Circles: John Hick and the Doctrine of the Incarnation,” in *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick*, ed. Harold Hewitt (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 191.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.

metaphysical claims made by the New Testament writers and confirmed at Chalcedon. Yet, John Hick's monumental work on religious pluralism, *An Interpretation of Religion*, is itself a metaphysical exploration of what can be rationally said and believed about the religious Ultimate. He vigorously asserts the truth of his hypothesis and the importance of it for a *non-exclusive* view of salvation, while dismissing a literal incarnation and the exclusive claims it brings.

Hick's own attempt to "spell out" a metaphorical incarnation offers no more clarity and carries with it the baggage of his religious pluralism. His view of the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth as myth or metaphor is particularly biased toward his pluralistic hypothesis as he selectively chooses only those properties of God which are in accordance with his universalist position and supposedly mirror what is common in all of the world's great religions. If Hick's religious epistemology could coherently demonstrate his bases for denying the Chalcedonian confession, then his position would be far more tenable.

To be sure, the relationship between ontology and epistemology must be given careful attention. "The relationship between what there is and how we know what there is is vital"<sup>48</sup> both for religious pluralism or exclusivism. Hick presumes to have escaped some of the epistemological traps that so often entangle any metaphysical claims of a religious nature by asserting that Jesus is the metaphor of God incarnate. When such metaphysical claims as "Jesus is both fully divine and fully human" are being made, it requires precise language to make it coherent. John Hick has leveled serious challenges to anyone who would attempt to "spell out" just what it means to believe in a literal incarnation of God. After demonstrating why Hick denies a literal incarnation of Jesus and a critique of his religious epistemology, chapters four and five will pursue some of these challenges.

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<sup>48</sup>E. David Cook, "Truth, Mystery and Justice," in *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 244.

## CHAPTER 2

## JOHN HICK'S TRANSFORMATION MODEL OF SALVATION

**Why Jesus Is Not Literally God Incarnate**

Once it is accepted that all of the world's great religious traditions are equally viable human responses to a religious Ultimate/Transcendent/Real, then it simply remains to be demonstrated how each tradition is a sufficient and efficient path toward salvation/transformation/liberation. It is impossible, given Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, that there is one and only one unique means of realizing a limitlessly better existence through a specific salvific model. In fact, "no one of the great world religions is salvifically superior to the rest."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it is unnecessary that Jesus be unique in any sense any more than other religious martyrs were unique. Inevitably, it is "misleading to see an acceptance of the Christian mythology of the cross as the only way to salvation for all human beings."<sup>50</sup>

The entire pluralistic hypothesis assumes *a priori* that it is not credible for a religious statement such as "Jesus is Lord" to be both literally true *and* culturally conditioned. By maintaining this polarized position, John Hick creates a false dilemma. He ends up holding a stance that is irreconcilable with his own position. In fact, Hick's pluralistic stance "does not even have the right to condemn those who reject pluralism and espouse exclusivism, for to do so implies that there is a sure standard of evaluation after all."<sup>51</sup> Though the pluralistic hypothesis is the standard, it does not provide a consistent foundation for evaluating truth-claims.

Hick refuses to go so far and believes the pluralistic hypothesis does not require this drastic allegation. He persists in claiming that each of the world's great religious traditions constitutes an effective context for the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Besides, one cannot directly observe the inner spirituality

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<sup>49</sup>John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (October 1988): 365-377.

<sup>50</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 132.

<sup>51</sup>D. A. Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," in *God and Culture*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 51.

of religious individuals. All that can be observed are the fruits of an apparent relationship with the divine and how that relationship affects the moral and spiritual quality of a life. Insofar as an unselfish regard for self and others is observed, then that religious tradition is salvifically effective, since love and compassion are the common properties which lie at the heart of all of the great traditions.<sup>52</sup> In fact, Hick is so committed to those criteria comprising *the* common element running throughout the religious traditions that he declares “if everyone acted on this basic principle [of love and compassion], taught by all the major faiths, there would be no injustice, no avoidable suffering, and the human family would everywhere live in peace.”<sup>53</sup>

Hick denies the likelihood that God may have uniquely and exclusively revealed himself in either a person or the writing of sacred text. His contention is that “the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological ‘spaces’ within which, or ‘ways’ along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation.”<sup>54</sup> Since “many human beings experience life in relation to a limitlessly greater transcendent Reality,”<sup>55</sup> it seems experience, rather than reason, is given the preeminent status; a classic maneuver with any inductive approach. Yet, this pragmatic soteriology provides no ground for the claim to religious objectivity. The final result is an arbitrary, though elaborate, form of religious pluralism that ends in a thoroughgoing relativism.

This inductive method has at least two difficulties. First, it has not been established that all religious expressions refer to the same Reality. The veracity of the world religions, at least soteriologically, must be assumed for Hick’s pluralism to work. However, there is no reason why one must conclude that “a common reference or signification from the observed ‘fact’ of co-equal soteriological effectiveness. One could just as well conclude that no matter how

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<sup>52</sup>Hick, “Pluralism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (October 1988): 367.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 368.

<sup>54</sup>Hick, *Problems*, 36-37.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 37.

soteriologically similar the world religions, Christianity is the one true faith.”<sup>56</sup> That is, at the phenomenal level, all religions may seem soteriologically effective, but only one is authentically sufficient. Another logically plausible alternative would be that *none* of the religious models bring about the salvific goals they espouse, but rather all are sociological phenomena yet to be satisfactorily explained.

Second, all human observations are themselves theory-laden, to a degree. Complete objectivity is only in the mind of God. Without some objective religious vantage point, which no human could claim without some special revelatory information, it becomes impossible to say *what* the religious traditions are doing salvifically. In an effort to favor all religions by reconstructing their essential salvific claims (as was demonstrated in chapter one), Hick’s position ends up favoring none of them.

In all fairness, Hick does believe there are genuine differences between the metaphysical beliefs of the world religions. He cites resurrection versus reincarnation, creation *ex nihilo* or eternal emanation of the universe as examples. But these he categorizes with the “undetermined questions” of the Buddha (*avyakata*).<sup>57</sup> It could be that empirical evidence may settle some of these disputes in the future, but in the mean time, these “are not matters concerning which absolute dogmas are appropriate.”<sup>58</sup> Putting this differently, one must hold on to their salvific truth-claims tentatively. But, he also claims that all of the major world religions can save. How?

The particular dogma that Hick finds most troublesome is the fact that one particular tradition is the sole salvific means for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Holding to his own *a priori* assumptions, Hick says,

clearly such a dogma is incompatible with the insight that the salvific transformation of human existence is going on, and so far as we can tell going on to a more or less equal extent, within all the great traditions. Insofar, then, as we accept that salvation is not confined to Christianity we must reject the old exclusivist dogma.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Loughlin, “Noumenon,” *Religious Studies* 23 (March, 1987): 503.

<sup>57</sup>Hick, “Pluralism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (October 1988): 373.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 375.

Hence, upon embracing religious pluralism, along with the universalism it implies, the clash between the religions' soteriological convictions becomes superfluous. The idea of a literal incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth is no longer necessary, since it is merely one, among many, of the human responses to the religious Real.

If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved.<sup>60</sup>

Hick's religious pluralism, therefore, is a discriminating pluralism. He discriminates between Christian exclusivism and his religious pluralism while, at the same time, seeking to incorporate a kind of Christianity into his pluralistic hypothesis. Not only this but, Hick would not grant the religious traditions of, say, Jim Jones and the Guyana suicides, or witchcraft, alchemy, and astrology a most favored religious tradition status. These are said to be aberrant beliefs or delusions.<sup>61</sup> Yet, how this pluralistic stance is different from an exclusivistic claim to salvation is unclear, given this selective approach. The closer one gets to Hick's pluralism, the more inconsistent it becomes.

A cursory reading of the New Testament reveals a compelling teaching with respect to the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus.<sup>62</sup> The perennial presence of sin, the hopelessness of humankind without the God of the Bible, and the uniqueness of Jesus' death and resurrection as the sole and sufficient means of salvation is the conviction of every author. Apart from God's initiative in the special revelation of his written word and the living Word Incarnate, these convictions would be outlandish. However, given the plausibility of the historical reliability of the New Testament<sup>63</sup> and the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,

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<sup>60</sup>Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth*, 179.

<sup>61</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 217.

<sup>62</sup>See, for example, John 5:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:21-26; 5:12-21; Ephesians 2:1-4, 12; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; 1 John 5:12; Revelation 5:1-14; 20:15.

<sup>63</sup>On the historicity of the New Testament see F. F. Bruce *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987), Philip Edcumbe Hughes, "The Truth of Scripture and the

Christianity becomes a tradition to be reckoned with in the marketplace of religious traditions. I will expand this further in chapter five.

### **The Necessity of Universal Salvation/Liberation**

“Is it credible,” asks John Hick, “that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, for a conscious creature to undergo physical and mental torture through unending time (if this is indeed conceivable) is horrible and disturbing beyond words; and the thought of such torment being deliberately inflicted by divine decree is totally incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, the doctrine of hell is “morally intolerable.”<sup>66</sup> Another possibility is that these descriptions are metaphorical, but real in the sense of endless torment.

Hick offers some philosophical and scientific bases for his denial of a literal hell. He argues that “bodies burning for ever [*sic*] and continuously suffering the intense pain of third-degree burns without ever being consumed . . . is as scientifically fantastic as it is morally revolting.”<sup>67</sup> Given Hick’s empiricism, it *would* be scientifically fantastic. But it remains metaphysically possible that those bodies and minds can be reconstructed so as to eternally endure the pain.<sup>68</sup>

Hick also argues that it is incongruent to hold the very notion of perpetual torment; for the “sheer monotony of the continuous pain would produce diminishing returns of agony.”<sup>69</sup> But this, too, assumes a greater degree of *material* and *psychological* continuity which may not exist between this life and the next. Though continuity of personal identity between this life and

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Problem of Historical Relativity,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 173-194.

<sup>64</sup>Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” in *The Myth*, 179.

<sup>65</sup>John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 200-201.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>68</sup>On the eternity of hell see Matthew 25:46; Mark 9:48; Revelation 20:14-15.

<sup>69</sup>Hick, *Death*, 199.

the next can be defended, it is unlikely the charge of “diminishing returns” is tenable if a *discontinuity* exists between this life and the next in the material makeup of persons. In addition, if persons undergo a change in their relationship to time in the next life, then it could hardly be “monotonous” to eternally endure pain.<sup>70</sup> Though God’s relationship to time may be different from ours (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pt. 3:8), it is logically possible that time, as we know it, may change beyond death.

After all, what exactly is the problem with an infinitely loving God assigning persons to eternal torment? According to the New Testament, God does not desire that any should perish, but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth, repent, and be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pt. 3:9). That the majority of persons make a well-, or even misinformed, decision to reject the light of revelation given by God no more implicates God as the direct cause of their condemnation any more than does the misuse of a gun implicate the gun manufacturer. Those who reject the truth that they do have are self-condemned (cf., Matt. 12:37; Jn. 3:18; 5:24; 5:29). Though all may not have the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel message itself, all do have the opportunity to respond to *some* truth about God according to Rom. 1:18-21, and it is on this basis that God can justly resign persons to hell.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>It is important to note that personal and material identity is an ontological matter, whereas identifiability an epistemic one. The point here is to illustrate the possibility of the reconstitution of a material person beyond that which current assumptions can grasp. On Hick’s view of the after-life see, “The Resurrection of the Person,” in *Death*, 278-296. For a clear and helpful reading on the defense of a holistic dualism see Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 166-167; John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). Cf., also, Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

<sup>71</sup>I recognize this paragraph is pregnant with theological concerns. In the spirit of Augustine and against a strict Armenian position, I hold a modified free-will defense for the justification of hell. For a fuller discussion of the issues raised cf., William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, ed., *Through No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), William Lane Craig, “No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ,” in *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (April, 1989): 172-188; Augustine’s “Grace and Free Will,” trans. Robert P. Russell, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 59, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 245-308; “On Free Will,” trans. J.H.S. Burleigh, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, (Philadelphia: Westminster), 102-217; Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

In order to avoid these apparent problems with the incompatibility between an infinitely loving God and eternal condemnation of those who reject God's love, Hick brings everyone into eternal bliss. This is hardly responsible with the biblical data (cf., Matt. 25:31-34). It may be existentially and psychologically pleasing to contemplate, but it does not answer the more probing philosophical and theological questions.

### **Critique and Summary**

Hick's universalism is a default position that is no more plausible than is his pluralistic hypothesis. In fact, when the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity are taken into account, hell becomes a much more plausible position. It is noteworthy to point out that nowhere in Hick's writings does he talk of a holy God or rebellion against God, both of which permeate the Old and New Testaments.

That there is a plurality of religious perspectives does not entail the conclusion of the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick. Real differences exist and, given the law of non-contradiction, not everyone can be correct in their beliefs on matters concerning salvation. Each tradition has its own specific claims on the process of attaining a better existence in the next life and, in order for Hick to be correct, every tradition must be incorrect. On the contrary, if Jesus is the only way to heaven, then Hick is incorrect.

Moreover, religious traditions have mutually exclusive revelatory claims to truth. Hick must consider such doctrines as the literal incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, his redeeming work on the cross, and his resurrection as expendable dogmas. If this strategy were applied to every major world religion that claims salvific truth, Hick's pluralism would entail a complete renovation of their essential defining beliefs.

John Hick's view of God governs how he sees the revelatory truth-claims of the religious traditions. Conversely, without some revelatory stance from which he can modify his view of God, Hick swims endlessly about in the sea of relativism with no anchor for reality. If he did claim an authoritative revelation from God, then his pluralism would be destroyed. In chapter three I will argue that his pluralism can't be helped by a Kantian-like religious epistemology that

entails a dualistic world. So, how *does* he know there is the sort of religious Ultimate that he is espousing, much less if it is the *same* religious Ultimate of all the religious traditions? In the words of D. A. Carson, “if he neither claims revelation nor offers criteria to validate such revelation, on what basis does he advance his position?”<sup>72</sup> Despite the philosophical rigor of Hick’s pluralism, the question still remains one of authority in his pluralism. Any religious claim that lacks an adequate foundation for assessing its validity is suspicious. And, a religious experience alone is simply insufficient for verification of a religious claim.

The importance of establishing a framework from which to evaluate religious experience that is authoritative and reliable cannot be underestimated. Without this framework, it becomes impossible to hold the kind of religious pluralism that John Hick puts forth. But, there is an inherent circularity in the argument that all religious expressions relate to the same religious Ultimate which, in turn, manifests itself in the varying religious expressions. This framework is groundless without some revelatory standpoint or some strong philosophical argument that renders a claim logically certain. However, Hick has simply put forth the varying religious experiences and drawn a hasty conclusion that they all refer to the same religious Ultimate. Moreover, according to McGrath, Hick assumes that where “Christian frameworks are biased, those of [pluralism] are neutral and disinterested.”<sup>73</sup> But this presumed detached and objective knowledge ends up being an attitude of scorn and arrogance toward the absolute truth-claims of exclusivist religions.

Hick has rejected the literal Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, because he has an underlying agenda: the elimination of Christianity’s distinctives. In so doing, he has banished the very beliefs that are requisite to the Christian tradition. What reasons does Hick offer for being Christian if the central claims of the faith are not literally true (*viz.*, that which corresponds to an actual state(s) of affairs)? One adheres to various beliefs *because* they are

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<sup>72</sup>Carson, “Witness,” in *God and Culture*, 49.

<sup>73</sup>Alister E. McGrath, “The Christian Church’s Response to Pluralism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35/4 (December: 1992): 494.

taken to conform to a reality that is literally true and proves to be wholly reliable. One who accepts the truth depends on it. But for Hick, historic truth simply isn't necessary, since everyone, saving the "obvious" such as Jim Jones and the like, are saved in the end.

Sharp lines are drawn, according to Hick, between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and what the writers of the New Testament came to believe about him. The authors of the New Testament took their best guess at reiterating what they experienced, but ended up writing unreliable history. Jesus of Nazareth becomes an historical caricature for Hick to develop according to his pluralism. Hick has chosen, apart from any authoritative revelation, to turn Jesus of Nazareth into a loving, open human being who is one example among many to follow. But, there are no compelling reasons to do so, since every way to heaven is *the* way for John Hick. Moreover, if salvation were certain for every religious community, then the distinctive holy person of a given community would play no ultimate role in alignment to Hick's religious Real.

Biblical Christianity is inextricably linked with the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Christianity of John Hick is theologically, Christologically, and soteriologically reduced beyond recognition. Having stripped it of every identifying proposition, Hick's Christianity would not be recognized by the apostles, nor Jesus himself. Rather than Christian doctrine being the response of credible witnesses to the actual events (viz., crucifixion, resurrection, ascension), John Hick's Christian doctrine of soteriology is nothing more than a reaction to culturally-conditioned stimuli which are never wholly reliable. A major mistake of orthodox Christians through the centuries, according to Hick, is not that error must be corrected in light of revealed truth; rather it is to think that there is truth with which to correct! The major delusion within humanity is that salvation should be sought after, since it was never lost. Though Hick does grant that salvation may be a process which could involve searching, the final outcome is that all are saved. The searching then becomes just a reaction to one's historical and cultural religious surroundings, at which point the searching serves no ultimate purpose.

## CHAPTER 3

## JOHN HICK'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

**Kantian Categories and the Attainment of Knowledge**

In chapter one it was pointed out how John Hick's commitment to Immanuel Kant's epistemic categories provided the groundwork for a full-blown philosophy of religious pluralism. The question we now turn to is "Can Kantian epistemological categories be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to form a theology of religious pluralism?" What exactly is the validity of Hick's religious epistemology? Even if he has purposefully adapted some Kantian concepts,<sup>74</sup> can Hick's system of belief be rationally justified, particularly as it relates to the denial of Jesus as literally God Incarnate?

To begin with, it is important to offer what Kant believed regarding the attainment of human knowledge and an assessment of his project. Kant initiated his own "Copernican revolution" when he challenged philosophers with a new theory of knowledge. He put forth the notion that the human mind contains categories that structure all sense perceptions and that these categories are necessary for understanding the phenomenal world of experience. Rather than our knowledge adjusting to sensory input, the sensory input adjusts to our knowledge.

Kant states that:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.<sup>75</sup>

Knowledge of the phenomenal world consists of a combination of *content* and *form*. Content is the "stuff" of sense perception, it is what is given to the mind. Without content or sense experience there would be no genuine knowledge. Yet, content alone is not sufficient for human knowledge to obtain. It must have a place to go or a space to fill in the human mind.

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<sup>74</sup>Cf., Hick, *Interpretation*, 240-241.

<sup>75</sup>Immanuel Kant, Introduction to the 2nd edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith trans. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 22.

Forms are the categories into which we fit the content of all sense perception. Without sense perception (i.e., experience or matter), the categories (= forms) would be empty space.

All sense perceptions, then, are received through these categories that subsist in the mind. That is, there is no objective thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) that can be perceived. Since all experience is first filtered through the *a priori* operations of the mind, what turns out to be known is the object as it appears. Consequently, a wall is erected between two *continua*: the *noumena* (the world-in-itself) and the *phenomena* (the world as it appears). It is as if life is seen through the tube of a black and white television. The viewing is a mere “representation” of what the (colorful) world-in-itself looks like. Sensory percepts are always modified by *a priori* concepts, capable of seeing only the “black and white” world.

In order to avoid the skepticism of David Hume, Kant maintained that continuity does exist between the *noumena* and *phenomena*. Yet, what makes human knowledge possible are the *a priori* categories uncovered by a process of “transcendental deduction.” Though his epistemological system is “trancendentally ideal,” because there is no direct knowledge of the *noumenal* world-in-itself, we do have the *phenomenal* world of sense perceptions whereby we can know something with universality and necessity, *qua* phenomena.

In his explanation of the process of attaining human knowledge, Kant maintained that experience (sense data) is put together (organized) by the mind’s categories, some of which include unity, plurality, causality, time, and space. These are *a priori* conditions under which we can have knowledge of the external phenomenal world. However, they do not serve to offer any help in knowing the noumenal world, or things-in-themselves. This is the transcendental world that can only be postulated by reason, not experience.

The theological implication is that reliable, objective knowledge about God cannot be obtained, since God is restricted to the noumenal realm and nothing of this realm can be directly apprehended. God cannot be experienced, only postulated. All human knowledge is limited to the phenomenal world—the world as it appears.

This sharp distinction between the two worlds of noumena and phenomena is not without its problems. In fact, the categories present a problem for Kant in even assuming the existence of a noumenal reality. Doug Groothuis explains:

Kant . . . grants that there is a reality outside of the human mind that affects the human mind or at least contributes somehow to our knowledge. But it seems Kant is barred from saying that things in themselves can cause anything because the concept of causation is only employable through the categories in relation to empirical [data perceived via the senses] knowledge. The category of existence can only be employed empirically. Then how can we say that things in themselves even exist at all without contradiction?<sup>76</sup>

How this bears upon Hick's religious epistemology will become evident (see below).

Suffice it to say here that the lack of any ontological reality within the categories, prior to sense perception, makes the categories otiose. Without content, it is difficult to subscribe any metaphysical status to them. This makes their viability as metaphysical realities questionable. I believe the contributions of Immanuel Kant, as I understand them, can have significant impact upon developing a full-blown religious epistemology. However, an epistemology that has its foundation in Kant should cohere, as much as is possible, with what Kant himself believed. It is to this concern that I now turn in evaluating John Hick's use of Immanuel Kant. I will argue that Hick has misused the Kantian scheme in order to make his religious pluralism work.

### **John Hick's Religious Epistemology**

John Hick saw advantages for his own epistemology of religion in the distinctions Kant drew between the *noumena* and the *phenomena*. Hick's religious Ultimate (the Real *an sich*) is analogous to Kant's *noumena*, whereas the various human responses to the Real *an sich* are analogous to the *phenomena*. However, Hick claims that the categories for interpreting religious experiences are culture-relative and not universal to all human minds. He openly admits this is a departure from Kant's own epistemology of religion, and defends his adaptation of Kant's basic analysis in order to put forth his new theory.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Douglas Groothuis, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 3.

<sup>77</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 243-244.

Having embraced the Kantian scheme, Hick initiated his own type of Copernican revolution. Hick writes,

the Copernican revolution in theology must involve an equally radical transformation of our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our own religion within it. It must involve a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the center to the thought that it is *God* who is at the center and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.<sup>78</sup>

In addition, Hick makes it clear that he shares Kant's schema for religious knowledge.

It was above all Immanuel Kant, with his doctrine that we are necessarily aware of the world in terms of certain forms and categories inherent in the structure of a unitary finite consciousness, who enabled the modern world to recognize the mind's own positive contribution to the meaningful character of its perceived environment.<sup>79</sup>

Highlighting the similarities between Hick and Kant, Gerard Loughlin somewhat satirically, states:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge of ultimate reality or the Real must conform to it. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of the Real by establishing something in regard to it *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success, in the truth of metaphysics, if we suppose that the Real must conform to our knowledge.<sup>80</sup>

The final result for John Hick's adaptation of Kant's epistemology is that all religions are best understood "as different phenomenal experiences of the one divine noumenon."<sup>81</sup> Thus, the religious Ultimate is never directly encountered by experience, but is an inference from religious experience; the "Real *an sich* is postulated by us as a pre-supposition, not of the moral life, but of religious experience and the religious life."<sup>82</sup> According to Hick, Yahweh, Allah, Krishna, Shiva, Brahman, *et al.* make up the divine phenomena and are the distinctive culturally-

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<sup>78</sup>John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 36.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 103. Note this comment approaches an anthropocentric, rather than Theocentric, model of religious truth. That is, meaning is not derived from but imposed upon the perceived environment by the human mind.

<sup>80</sup>Gerard Loughlin, "Noumenon and Phenomena," *Religious Studies* 23 (March, 1987): 493-508.

<sup>81</sup>Hick, *Names*, 94. This is earlier Hick. Later, he explicitly says that the Real cannot be described as being one or many (cf., Hick, *Interpretation*, 350). It appears that as Hick's pluralistic hypothesis develops, so does his Real *an sich*.

<sup>82</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 243.

conditioned responses to the religious Ultimate. These collections of religious expressions “constitute varying human responses, within the setting of the different cultures or forms of human life, to the same infinite transcendent reality, which we are calling the Eternal One.”<sup>83</sup>

In upholding the distinction between the “transcendent reality” and the “varying human responses,” Hick is required to give an account of why it is that these “varying human responses” are so varied. Can he actually do this? If the “responses” are manifestations of the religious Ultimate, then to what degree are they accurate representations if no continuity exists between the noumenon and the phenomena? Putting it differently,

the set of true propositions about a given image (e.g. Allah, or Amida Buddha) must form a subset of the set of all true propositions about the [religious Ultimate] as it is in itself. For if this were not the case then it is hard to see how the various images of the divine could be considered at all informative about the [religious Ultimate]. Indeed, there would be little reason for referring to them as images of the divine reality.<sup>84</sup>

But, Hick insists upon some kind of continuity between the noumenon and the phenomena. He explains: “thus although we cannot speak of the Real *an sich* in literal terms, nevertheless we live inescapably in relation to it, and in all that we do and undergo we are having to do with it as well.”<sup>85</sup> Of course, if Hick is saying that the Real *an sich* cannot be directly perceived in the human mind, but that the divine reality must be presupposed to explain the various religious manifestations, then he comes closer to offering an ineffability thesis of the Real *an sich*. The continuity for Hick appears to be merely practical, not rational, since nothing literally can be said about the Real *an sich*.

What exactly is the nature of the relationship between the Real *an sich* and ourselves? If we live in relation to the religious Ultimate, how can we assert something about that which nothing can be asserted? Since “none of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperiencable reality that underlies that real,”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>84</sup>Harold A. Netland, “Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism,” *Religious Studies* 22 (September, 1986): 249-261.

<sup>85</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 351.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 350.

how can anything informative whatsoever be said about this “unexperientable reality?” Hick, in seeking to preserve the noumenal Real *an sich*, seems to have relegated it to ineffability. It would seem that no positive property of the Real *an sich* could be attributed to it. This leaves the problem of the *via negativa*, that is, one can only say what God is not. But, as Netland points out, negative predication goes a long way to say virtually nothing about something. “Simply to assert that some entity S does not have properties x, y, and z is hardly informative of S unless there is presupposed some positive knowledge.”<sup>87</sup>

The ineffability thesis that Hick puts forth is a kind of ‘soft’ ineffability. He recognizes the problem of a strong ineffability (= if no concepts at all can be applied to the Real *an sich*, then contradiction results).<sup>88</sup> Yet, he opts for the notion that no “substantial properties” (such as “being good,” “powerful,” “having knowledge”) can be applied to the Real *an sich*.<sup>89</sup> Terms which predicate something substantially, according to Hick, cannot be said to be informative about the Real. It would appear, though, that the property of ‘self-subsistence’ or ‘ontological independence’ is a substantial property. So, the sentence that we “live inescapably in relation to [the Real]” cannot be literally true or false, since we cannot affirm the existence or non-existence of the Real. And, anything that is neither true nor false is *meaninglessness*. If I say “It is neither true nor false that there is a tree outside my office window,” I have said nothing meaningful. I may as well have said “*Widgets wash wistfully while wildly waiting willfully.*” In addition, since nothing substantial can be ascribed to the Real *an sich*, how can it be the ground of all religious experience? What rational justification does one have to subscribe to the existence or religious-experience-producing nature of Hick’s Real *an sich*? I suspect there is very little, if any at all.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Netland, *Voices*, 218.

<sup>88</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 239.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>For a clear refutation of Hick’s ineffability thesis see Keith E. Yandell, “Some Varieties of Religious Pluralism,” in *Inter-Religious Models and Criteria* ed., J. Kellenberger (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 187-211.

Hick realized a potential problem regarding his ineffability notion of the Real *an sich* and sought to answer it.

If we can say virtually nothing about [the Real *an sich*], why affirm its existence? The answer is that the reality or non-reality of the postulated noumenal ground of the experienced religious phenomena constitutes the difference between a religious and a naturalistic interpretation of religion. If there is no such transcendent ground, the various forms of religious experience are purely human projections. If on the other hand there is such a transcendent ground, then these phenomena may be joint products of the universal presence of the Transcendent and of the varying sets of concepts and images operating within the religious traditions of the earth. To affirm the Real is thus to affirm that religious experience is not solely a construction of our human imagination but is a response—though always a culturally conditioned response—to the Real.<sup>91</sup>

This is clearly a case of bifurcation, viz., all religious phenomena are either a product of human imagination or a genuine response to the Real. Hick's position does not allow for alternatives. He states that a naturalistic interpretation of religious experience is not preferable. Even if this were true, it does not follow that Hick's Real is the *only* transcendent ground of all religious phenomena. Couldn't there be more than one? Since Hick's categories for interpreting religious phenomena are culture-relative, and the culture-relative categories in place may be those which include a plurality of divine beings (such as various strands of Hinduism), then it seems possible to have more than one transcendent ground for religious phenomena.

Trying to describe the relationship between the noumenon and the phenomena, as well as how the phenomenal world of sense perception is constructed in the mind, it appears Hick ends up defeating his own purposes.

. . . the Real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, according to Kant, we experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorical scheme . . . All that we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of this information is that it is the reality whose influence *produces*, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience.<sup>92</sup>

In seeking to substantiate the noumenon's ability to "produce" informational input from the Real *an sich*, Hick has created a considerable problem. If the input produced is, in any sense,

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<sup>91</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 143.

<sup>92</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 243, emphasis mine.

informational, does this information become transformed into metaphor when we try to communicate it? Hick indicates this is to be the case. “None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperientable reality that underlies that realm.”<sup>93</sup> But, if it can be said that the noumenal source influences or produces religious experiences, then this assumes far more than Hick may be willing to admit. First, the noumenal source exists. Second, it informs the human mind. Third, it produces religious experiences. If any of the previous three statements are only metaphorically true and not literally true, then it seems Hick has lost considerable ground for his main hypothesis, namely, that the Real *an sich* cannot literally exist, inform, or produce!

Furthermore, how is it we are entitled to “say” anything meaningful about the noumenon? If we do, it cannot be “literally” meaningful according to Hick. This leaves us with metaphor. But, how can it be meaningful to assert that it is “metaphorically” true that the noumenon is a “source” or that it “produces” the phenomenal world? Is Hick implicitly having to admit the use of non-metaphorical concepts in order to refer to the Real *an sich*? It appears that, in an effort to nullify any substantial metaphysical claims about the religious Ultimate, Hick has pulled the rug out from underneath a tenable epistemology of religion. It would seem that the only way for Hick to avoid skepticism is an appeal to his eschatological verification.<sup>94</sup>

Hick leaves the most significant question unanswered in his use of Kant’s noumenon/phenomena distinctions: “If the existence of the noumenal Real is independent of religious experience, yet somehow related to it, how is the inconceivable conceived/experienced?” The only possible venue Hick has is the use of mythological language.

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 350. Also, cf., *ibid.*, 246.

<sup>94</sup>Though beyond the scope of this thesis, Hick’s eschatological verification asserts that the end-state, after death, will verify one’s basic expectations of the next life. See Hick’s *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 178-180, “Theology and Verification,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 437-452, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 90-92, and *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 110-128. This is a smoke screen to ward off epistemological arguments against Hick’s theism. Moreover, this you-won’t-know-until-you-get-there notion provides virtually no assurance in this life and results in skepticism as it does nothing to affirm theism as Hick hopes.

In fact, myth is the bridge between noumenon and phenomena. Hick writes regarding his use of myth:

This relationship between the ultimate noumenon and its multiple phenomenal appearances, or between the limitless, transcendent reality and our many partial human images of it makes possible mythological speech about the Real.<sup>95</sup>

Later in the same work, Hick claims that the various mythological representations of the world's religions are

true in so far as the responses which they tend to elicit are in soteriological alignment with the Real. Their truthfulness is the practical truthfulness which consists in guiding us aright. They therefore do not conflict with one another as would rival factual hypotheses. Different mythologies may each be valid as ways of evoking, within the life of a particular faith community, human self-transcendence in relation to the Real.<sup>96</sup>

The line drawn by Hick between truth and significance is blurred beyond recognition. Truth is merely a matter of pragmatics not dogmatics; orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. It is prescriptive, not descriptive; myth, not fact. Without question, it becomes clear that Hick's defense of the pluralistic hypothesis is to

convert the inconsistent doctrines of the different religions into myths and then to claim that these myths only trivially differ from one another in their schematizations of the noumenal Real . . . This move neatly dispenses altogether with the issue of the specific truth-claims expressed by the often contrary doctrines of the religious traditions. Thus all . . . religions, despite their marked differences in basic teachings are more or less valid . . . not for any intrinsic reason connected with what they specifically teach but because they all evoke human self-transcendence in relation to the Real.<sup>97</sup>

More importantly, though, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis seems to have little explanatory power. To say that the mythological representations of the Real *an sich* are true in so far as they bring about the appropriate responses, and then to offer the appropriate responses as evidence that the myths are true is question-begging of the first order.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the criterion of "practical truthfulness" which "guides us aright" does nothing to tell us what is at work in the definition of "aright." Likewise, if the Real cannot be described in literal terms, what kind of

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<sup>95</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 247-248.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 375.

<sup>97</sup>Kenneth Thomas Rose, "Knowing the Real: John Hick on the Cognitivity of Religions and Religious Pluralism," Ph.D. dissertation, (Harvard University, 1992), 110-111.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 111, n. 120.

truth is being promulgated? This is a mixing of concepts where the utility of a religion and its truthfulness are not necessarily related. Ethics and epistemology are distinct categories.

In addition, Hick claims there is no conflict between the world's religions because they are not "factual hypotheses." It seems Hick is implying that one can have truth without facts. That certain of the world's great religious traditions assert a multitude of facts seems to go unnoticed by Hick. Of course, he is speaking of practical truthfulness. But, Hick is creating a false dichotomy here between practical truth and facts. How they are separate is never made clear. One could not have truth without facts. Truth in the human mind requires agreement or conformity of the mind to the facts of reality. Conversely, falsity entails the opposite. This, of course, requires that there exists a mind-independent reality to which the human intellect conforms. Nevertheless, given this assumption, truth is believing what is, is, or what is not, is not. Truth, therefore, applies to matters of fact.

The following concerns in this section properly belong to chapter two. My purpose for adding them here is to interact adequately with the quote by Hick on the previous page. Hick provides a soteriological criterion for grading all religions which is "the gradual transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness."<sup>99</sup> When this criterion is offered, it comes dangerously close to the absolute claims Hick is so eager to avoid. Though not completely arbitrary, Hick's soteriological criterion presupposes certain anthropological and theological claims that *are* arbitrary without a tenable epistemology or divine revelatory source. Similarly, with all the conflicting reports about the human condition (Advaita Vedanta Hinduism claims ignorance, whereas Christianity claims sin as the fundamental problem), "soteriological alignment" to what and from what is nothing more than an empty place-holder.

Moreover, Hick regards contradictory ways of salvation in the religious traditions as complementary. How he reconciles the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism with the Five Pillars of Islam, or release from *samsara* in Theravada Buddhism with justification by faith alone in

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<sup>99</sup>Hick, *Problems*, 67-87.

Protestant Evangelicalism is impossible to apprehend. Hick must radically redefine their essential claims to show their compatibility. While Hick may think he has done this successfully, it is highly unlikely he will obtain any converts, since conversion would include denial of central propositions held by the respective traditions.

### **Truth in Religious Pluralism: Constant Variables**

Given the clear disjunction between the Real *an sich* and the varied manifestations of it in the world's religions, Hick's view of revelation remains to be shown. He made it clear early on in his move toward religious pluralism that revelation is non-propositional. By this he means

revelation is not a divine promulgation of propositions, nor is faith a believing of such propositions. The theological propositions formulated on the basis of revelation have a secondary status. They do not constitute the content of God's self-revelation but are human and therefore fallible verbalizations, constructed to aid both the integration of our religious experience into our own minds and the communication of religious experience to others.<sup>100</sup>

But Hick does not sufficiently show why it is necessary that human theological propositions based upon revelation are necessarily fallible. Hick appears to be assuming *a priori* that *because they are human*, theological propositions cannot be infallible. This is another instance of a false dichotomy. It is possible that theological propositions could be both human and infallible given divine inspiration. God could so superintend a human writer's work that what is freely written is precisely what God intended to communicate. Moreover, Paul R. Eddy demonstrates how this surrender to a fallible, non-propositional view of revelation opens up the possibility of several metaphysical premises which illuminate the framework of Hick's entire religious system.

- 1) the world is religiously ambiguous (apparent contradiction in religious diversity)
- 2) humanity operates within the sphere of cognitive freedom whereby, in accordance with the religious ambiguity of the world, there is an "epistemic distance" between the religious Ultimate and creation
- 3) faith in the religious Ultimate is *interpretation* of experiences in religious ways

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<sup>100</sup>Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 30.

4) the religious Ultimate reveals itself in a manner which is capable of being interpreted either revelationally or non-revelationally<sup>101</sup>

Eddy goes on to show how this impacted Hick's Christological views.

In faithfulness to his views of non-propositional revelation and the epistemological primacy of religious experience, Hick finds the cognitive grounds for Christological orthodoxy not in a cognitively-based revelation of truth from God, but rather in the very human attempts of the early Christian community to formulate what they perceived to be the theological implications of their religious experience of Jesus.<sup>102</sup>

Upon assuming that propositional revelation cannot objectively account for the historical Jesus, truth in religion becomes a matter of varying interpretations. Truth is the mediation of culturally and geographically conditioned human responses that make it impossible to know whether or not Jesus of Nazareth was literally God Incarnate. Yet, Hick explicitly claims that he knows for sure the orthodox Christian views of revelation and Christology are wrong. Though he has logical and historical reasons for asserting this, and he is not appealing to some new revelation, *how* he can make such a claim is difficult, if not impossible, to see. Unless Hick can demonstrate on historical and philosophical grounds why all other claims of divine revelation are inferior, his pluralistic hypothesis is significantly weakened.

Though the personal dimension is important in response to propositional revelation, it is not necessary to emphasize the frame at the expense of the picture. What goes on inside a person's conceptual framework is a matter of factual truth, as well as practical truth (= religiously significant). Though the development of an individual's conceptual framework may, in some sense and to some degree, be geographically and culturally conditioned, it seems intellectually irresponsible *to emphasize interpretation of the facts at the expense of the facts themselves.*

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<sup>101</sup>Paraphrased from Paul R. Eddy, "John Hick's Theological Pilgrimage," *Proceedings of the Wheaton College Theology Conference* (1993), vol. 1, *The Challenge of Religious Pluralism: An Evangelical Analysis and Response*, 28-29.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 30.

For example, to intentionally believe what is factually untrue is the height of superstition.<sup>103</sup> One has an epistemic duty to align beliefs with the facts. When this does not occur, then myth and metaphor become reality. Likewise, to take what is factually untrue as religiously significant is pure irrationalism, at which case the significance is person-relative and devoid of facts. One's beliefs, interpretations, and convictions that are understood to be universally true for all people, everywhere, and at all times must be grounded in some objective state of affairs that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by evidence, reason, and revelation. And this revelation must be both practically *and* factually true. Otherwise, we would have as many religions as we do people, and it is doubtful that Hick would allow his pluralism to go this far.

This brings us to the question of truth itself. What is the nature of religious truth? For Hick, religious truth is mythical; it is the product of human responses to the religious Ultimate. These responses are produced by the *a posteriori* experiences that are geographically and culturally conditioned. Therefore, religious truth is not a product of God's communication to humans, but merely what various cultures have believed is true regarding the religious Ultimate. This anthropocentric model for truth seems necessary for Hick's religious pluralism to work. Religious truth is a subjective response rather than an objective proposition to be confirmed or disconfirmed.

More important, however, is the false dichotomy Hick sets up regarding religious truth by making it either propositional *or* personal. It is not logically impossible that both could be correct. For example, if I make the claim that 'God loves me' I am making at least three propositional statements: 1) 'God exists,' 2) 'I exist,' and 3) 'a relationship exists between God and me.' The statement 'God loves me' is profoundly personal, but is not devoid of propositional statements that are fact-asserting. Yet, Hick appears to assume *a priori* that religious truth cannot be a personal proposition that genuinely describes an empirically verifiable state of

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<sup>103</sup>Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 64-65. Of course, one can hold false beliefs and still be rational, e.g., believing in a flat earth. I am primarily referring to deliberate beliefs *against* the facts.

affairs. In this argument he offers no reason for his religious pluralism to be adopted over Christianity.

### **The Nature of Truth and Historical Information**

As the former section indicates, several considerations must be taken into account before a legitimate epistemology of religion can be developed which sustains the reality of Jesus as God Incarnate. While Hick's elaborate treatment of religious epistemology in his *Interpretation of Religion* is systematically developed, it ends up redefining the central claims of the religious traditions in order to fit his pluralistic model. If reduced to equivalence (= all religions share an equal status to the Real *an sich*), then the labels "Christian," "Muslim," or "Buddhist" ought to be dropped altogether.

First, it is important to distinguish between a sentence and a proposition. A simple sentence is a collection of symbols or sounds (words or speech) that consists of a subject and predicate. Interrogative and imperative sentences are not, strictly speaking, concerned with truth or falsity. For example, the question "May I have the last cookie?" is neither true nor false. Similarly, no one would ask if it is true or false to "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is a prescriptive or ethical sentence, not a propositional or descriptive one. Hence, interrogative and imperative sentences are not propositions.<sup>104</sup>

Indicative sentences, however, are descriptive and express propositions. To claim that "I am a male" is to make a statement about an actual or possible state of affairs. The claim presupposes the truth of my existence as well as some notion of maleness. It also presupposes some type of correspondence or relationship between myself and the concept of maleness. For concepts to be meaningful, they must be linked to content or properties that adequately describe a subject. To have "a concept of some entity *x* is, roughly, to know the meaning of the

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<sup>104</sup>This is not to say that all interrogative or imperative sentences are not propositional or have some indication of truth or falsity. Some questions have imperatival overtones. For example, if I say to my child, "Did you clean your room, yet?" I really am making a propositional claim, viz., "I am telling you that your room must be clean!"

word  $x$ , and to have a grasp of the properties [content] which distinguish  $x$ .”<sup>105</sup> In other words, concepts presuppose content. Without content, concepts would be vacuous. The point is that “truth is a property of propositions [declarative sentences] such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which it refers is as the proposition asserts it to be; otherwise it is false.”<sup>106</sup> This is the correspondence theory of truth.

But Hick locates the property of truth, not in religious propositions themselves, but in the communal memories of persons who interpret their experiences religiously. In so doing, he escapes the incompatibility of religious truth-claims. Or does he? Can experience and/or interpretation take place in an historical vacuum? Take for instance the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Hick juxtaposes the Islamic position against the Christian tradition that it either was or was not Jesus of Nazareth who died by crucifixion. Hick calls this, and other issues, a penultimate matter since

differences of historical judgment, although having their own proper importance, do not prevent the different traditions from being effective, and so far as we can tell more or less equally effective, contexts of salvation. Evidently, then, it is not necessary for salvation that we should have correct historical information. . . . However, [the different religious traditions] cannot all be wholly true; probably none is wholly true; perhaps all are partly true. But the salvific process has been going on through the centuries despite this unknown distribution of truth and falsity.<sup>107</sup>

Now if (a) “the salvific process has been going on through the centuries despite this unknown distribution of truth and falsity,” and (b) Christianity insists upon correct historical information regarding the death and resurrection of Jesus for one’s soteriological status to be effective, then (c) Christianity is in error regarding salvation. And, if this is true, then Hick has no reason for affirming that salvation is “going on” within Christianity. Yet, this seems inconsistent with what Hick wants to say about Christianity. If he believes the salvific process is occurring within Christianity, then he must divorce the basis for this claim from the historical

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<sup>105</sup>Netland, *Voices*, 138.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>107</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 146-147. Though this statement hinges, in important ways, on what Hick means by “salvation,” it is used here to demonstrate the relativism of his epistemology.

fact of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, in doing so, the claim that salvation is occurring within Christianity is suspended in mid-air and becomes virtually impossible to substantiate.

So, on what basis can Hick *know* that the salvation process has been going on within Christianity? It is clear that he cannot claim this “truth” has been revealed to him. If it is intuitive, he can never know if he is correct, since others intuit differently (e.g., Islam). Even if everyone had the same intuition regarding salvation, it is still logically possible that all are wrong.

Besides, the disciples of Jesus claimed to have correct historical information regarding the death and resurrection of Jesus and that this information was not simply a human projection (1 Cor. 15:3-4). What the disciples of Jesus saw regarding his death and resurrection, what they subsequently wrote about, and what really occurred are all one and the same. So, if there is an objective mind-independent reality, viz., “the death and resurrection of Jesus,” that occurred in the first century and the disciples claimed to have witnessed it, what is the problem with labeling it historically accurate? Simply because the claimants are human and experienced it does not necessarily call for it being factually untrue, any more than the claim that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in the nineteenth century is factually untrue because some human was at Ford’s Theater and witnessed it.

Therefore, all propositions regarding historical information are either true or they are false. Historical information is not strictly person-relative; it is relative to an actual state of affairs. This is not to say, however, that all revelation is fully transparent. It is possible that divine revelation includes mysteries, which are different from myths. Myths, for Hick, are not literally true, whereas *a mystery can be literally true but not fully understood, only apprehended to a degree*. Mysteries “exceed our natural human powers of knowing and

understanding. They may be intelligible in themselves, but they are not completely intelligible to us.”<sup>108</sup>

Now, if mysteries are intelligible, then the notion of literal truth may very well apply to the divine Incarnation of Jesus. The Apostle Paul calls Jesus of Nazareth “the mystery of God,” not the “myth” or “metaphor” of God (Col. 2:2). Though I will develop this idea of Jesus as the mystery of God more fully in a subsequent chapter, suffice it to say here that other examples of mysteries could be taken from the notion that divine and human authorship of Scripture is mysteriously brought together in such a way that both God and humans co-authored the same work and communicated the same infallible, inerrant content. Similarly, God’s sovereignty and human freedom could be shown to be compatible where the existence of one does not abrogate the other. These examples aren’t meant to explain one mystery by another. They are given to illustrate the possibility of mysteries that can be literally and objectively true. More on this later.

### **Religious Truth, Experience, and Revelation**

Given the priority Hick puts on religious experience, a few things should be said regarding the relationship between experience and truth. There is a personal, substantial, and formal triad existing in all experience: the *perceiver*, the *perceived*, and the *perception*. Another way of putting this would be to label the perceiver as *subject*, the perceived as *object*, and the perception as the cognitive and metaphysical *relationship between* subject and object. All three are necessary before any claims to a religious experience can legitimately be made. With this in mind there are two models of experience: the direct model and the mediated model, and it is possible that one’s religious experience can be both direct and mediated.

In the direct model a person could claim to experience the infinite God. One need not be omniscient to directly experience an omniscient God, just as a person need not be highly intelligent to have a direct experience of a highly intelligent person. It may be impossible to *comprehensively* experience a highly intelligent person if you are not highly intelligent, or an

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<sup>108</sup>Adler, *Truth*, 109.

omniscient God if you are not omniscient, but this does not preclude the possibility of having a veridical experience of some external person who is really there to experience. “For if we are limited to experience of subjective sensations and *never* have any direct awareness of the objective reality which presumably causes those sensations, then how can we infer anything about that reality from the occurrence of the sensations?”<sup>109</sup> One who denies that experiences (religious or otherwise) can be a direct encounter of an actual state of affairs, carries the burden of proof that the perceiver experiences something else other than the perceived.

On the other hand, some experiences may be interpretive; that is mediated by or through *a priori* categories in the human mind. This does not necessarily require that all interpreted experiences are incredulous or false. Nor does it entail that all interpreted experiences are genuine human responses to the same religious ultimate. Hick claims that “Adonai [of Judaism] and the Dharmakaya [of Mahayana Buddhism], although phenomenologically utterly different, may nevertheless both stand in their own soteriological alignment with the Real.”<sup>110</sup>

But without an adequate metaphysical and/or epistemological basis for this claim, this statement is without warrant. Moreover, apart from some revelatory vantage point, it becomes impossible for Hick’s religious pluralism to obtain. The revelation of the Christian Scriptures claims that Adonai is *ontologically* different from all other gods, and is not just one possible human response among many (Isaiah 40). To claim that a person only experiences the medium, or that the perceiver only experiences the perception and not the perceived, gives the impression that this claim is resistant to all forms of verification.

Given the correspondence view of truth as the necessary means for testing religious truth claims, the perceiver has a perception of a fact that either corresponds to an actual state of affairs or does not. Correspondence to something non-factual (e.g., “I perceive pink elephants dancing on my pillow”) is no correspondence at all, since there is no actual state of affairs where

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<sup>109</sup>Evans, *Philosophy*, 84.

<sup>110</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 373.

pink elephants exist. In other words, false beliefs fail to correspond to anything at all, and without some way of verifying the claimant's perception, there is little reason to believe a proposition is true.

Nevertheless, the position that all interpreted experiences are genuine human responses to the same religious Ultimate is the trump card which John Hick persistently plays. Even though most observations of the phenomenal world are filtered through the gridwork of one's prior beliefs, it does not necessarily demand the kind of religious pluralism John Hick postulates. In fact, it is possible that some standard does exist which is above all religious experience and is the means whereby religious experiences can be evaluated. Christianity offers just such a standard: the divine revelation of the Bible.

Hick's non-propositional view of divine revelation demands that religious claims of ultimacy are wrong. When religious phenomena is absolutized, then, despite the degree of correspondence to an actual state of affairs, the uniqueness of any religious claim cannot be held on to. Though "the ontological implications of the Judeo-Christian image of the divine as Yahweh . . . are incompatible with the ontological monism of the notion of Nurguna Brahman from Advaita Vedanta,"<sup>111</sup> they all must have the same divine referent. But how does Hick *know* this, given his position that revelation is not only non-propositional, but fallible, mythical human accounts of various exclusivist traditions?

Hick's fundamental assumptions regarding the identity of Jesus of Nazareth are directly tied to his denial of propositional revelation. He maintains that early Christological understanding evolved in a linear fashion and that the view of Jesus as literally God Incarnate is what the early church came to believe. The Christian Scriptures do suggest this, but are not accurate reflections of what Jesus thought about himself. As Hick writes:

by the time the Gospels began to be written, the two images of the Son of Man and the Messiah had become more or less fused in the Christian mind, so that when in the Markan

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<sup>111</sup>Harold A. Netland, "Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth," *Missiology* 15 (1987): 86.

passion story Jesus, before the Sanhedrin, is asked if he is the Messiah, he replies, 'I am . . . ' It is a widespread critical opinion that these words are not in fact historical.<sup>112</sup>

This sweeping generalization seems to be the prevailing attitude Hick has regarding the entire New Testament. The fact that this opinion is "widespread" (at least among pluralists like Hick, and there aren't *that* many!) and "critical," says nothing as to whether or not these opinions are correct. Nevertheless, despite his historical skepticism regarding Jesus of Nazareth, Hick makes some significant claims himself which appear to be groundless. He says,

what I myself see when I try to peer back through the New Testament documents . . . is a man, Jesus, whose immensely powerful God-consciousness made God . . . intensely and startlingly real. He did not intend to found a continuing church or a new religion, and he was mistaken in his expectation of an early end to ordinary human history. Nevertheless he was so transparently open to the divine presence that his life and teaching have a universal significance which can still help to guide our lives today.<sup>113</sup>

First of all, who wants guidance from someone who errs regarding the end of history? It seems that Jesus, who made so many claims regarding the consummation of history (Matthew 24-25), would have much at stake if he were wrong. How does Hick account for the sudden rise of the Christian Church if Jesus were wrong about such important issues as his return, the ultimate triumph over evil, and the inauguration of the eternal state? Surely the disciples of Jesus would have 'caught on' a few decades or even centuries later if Jesus were mistaken about the end times. But the Christian Church remains! Second, how does Hick have access to such considerable information about the inner life of Jesus without some type of special revelation? Hick turns right around and claims that "no statements about what Jesus did or did not say or think can be made with certainty."<sup>114</sup> Does this include those statements made by Hick about Jesus as well?

Hick's position methodologically excludes anyone, including himself, from being privy to some kind of objective propositional knowledge about God and Jesus of Nazareth. From what

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<sup>112</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 20. The variant reading on this text (Mk. 14:62) is unsupported and the shorter reading is, more than likely, historically accurate. See Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 770.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 27.

definitive and authoritative source does Hick derive the information that all religiously interpreted experiences are genuine human responses to the same religious Ultimate? It is apparent that John Hick has reconstructed and reinterpreted the evidence that is available in the New Testament to build his case for a religious pluralism.

If Jesus of Nazareth is, in some sense, revealing God, then it follows that God reveals himself personally.<sup>115</sup> In this Hick would probably agree. God speaks in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But what, or rather who, is being responded to is not just a matter of communal memories nor a static proposition, but a literal person. Hick wants to shift the focus from the person of Jesus to the beliefs of religious communities. As Netland reminds us, the “religious faith of believers will not rid us of the question of the truth value of the beliefs endorsed by the various traditions.”<sup>116</sup> Truth is a feature of propositions, not communities or persons. Although, propositions about persons are either true or false (law of excluded middle), the question to be answered is not who or how many believe this or that proposition, but does this or that proposition describe an actual state of affairs. Simply describing the differing practices of the various religious traditions, as Hick does so well, does not get at the issue of whether or not these traditions are true accounts.

To confuse the issue of truth with the response to truth is a basic epistemological mistake. The category of truth and the category of human response are not the same thing, just as meaning and significance aren't the same. Furthermore, the entire pluralistic hypothesis reduces the substantial truth-claims of all the religious traditions of the world to culturally-conditioned notions that don't say anything universally valid or substantially informative. The viability of Hick's religious pluralism rests *solely* upon its power to orient persons toward some unknowable, inexpressible, seemingly vacuous noumenal Real. Despite the fact that he interacts with such issues as a linear vs. cyclical view of history, eternal vs. non-eternal universe, he

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<sup>115</sup>Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982), 45.

<sup>116</sup>Netland, *Voices*, 127.

dismisses them as ultimately unimportant soteriologically, relegating them to secondary issues.<sup>117</sup> Yet, it is simply too much to ask of the religious traditions of the world to relegate some of their essential metaphysical claims that substantiate their entire system to a secondary status. Likewise, it is truly ironic that Hick expects all religions to respect one another *except for the one doctrine that each of the world religions holds dear*, viz., that *they* have, a unique answer for our greatest need: salvation/liberation/transformation/enlightenment!

Unless Hick can demonstrate the superiority of his own vantage point that allows him to trivialize and relativize the truth-claims of the world's religions, it becomes very difficult indeed to believe him. How can Hick get away with epistemically disqualifying any absolute truth-claim without himself doing this very thing? As Lesslie Newbigin notes:

There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to the knowledge which is available to fallible human beings. We have to ask, 'How do you know that the truth about God is greater than what is revealed to us in Jesus?'<sup>118</sup>

In so far as exclusivist religions are concerned and for his pluralism to work, Hick must claim to have had some new revelation that is superior to the revelation claims made by the exclusivist religions. Otherwise, he stands on very weak epistemological ground. Surely Hick cannot expect his religious pluralism to be taken seriously when he cannot offer a viable means for verifying his truth-claims! His eschatological verification model is not very satisfying (see note 94). Without Hick setting forth, in clear terms, what his higher truth or vantage point is from which he can accurately evaluate the exclusivist religions of the world, he has no basis for relativizing their truth-claims, nor absolutizing his own.

Furthermore, a Christian has no reason to take Hick's nebulous Real in the place of a tradition that offers historically verifiable means for the acceptance or rejection of its claims (e.g., the reliability of New Testament documents, the death and resurrection of Jesus). In other

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<sup>117</sup>Hick, *Interpretation*, 369.

<sup>118</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 170.

words, it is genuinely ironic that Hick's pluralism, as open-ended as he wants it to be, does not have space for the exclusive claims of Christianity. By forcing a choice between (a) the historically reliable and religiously significant events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, or (b) an innovation and radical reinterpretation of those events, Hick has made himself out to be a selective pluralist, if not an exclusivist!

In confusing meaning with consequences, Hick falls into the error of conceptual relativism or universalist perspectivalism. Paul Griffiths explains.

[John Hick's] position is perspectivalist in that it claims that religious communities 'embody different perspectives and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the real or ultimate'; it is universalist in that the attempt to discriminate among these different conceptions, to judge that some are adequate and some are not, is rejected.<sup>119</sup>

Hick's epistemology flounders when used to justify the contention that, in the words of Griffiths, "any religious community that claims cognitive superiority for its set of doctrine-expressing sentences over that of another religious tradition must be making a false claim."<sup>120</sup> As elaborate as it may seem, Hick's epistemic foundation appears to be another human and finite opinion in the plethora of religious conversation from which ideologies tentatively and sporadically emerge!

Whether beginning with reason or experience (cf. 1 John 1:1-2 for an example of the latter), it is not necessary that one be excluded at the expense of the other. Both are important for an adequate religious epistemology to be advanced. Human knowledge is possible because *a priori* categories are imposed upon the external world of experience, as Kant has shown. I believe, however, it is also the case that the external world of experience shapes and reshapes, to a degree, the mind's categories for interpretation of our experiences, religious or otherwise. When there is correspondence between reality as it is in itself and the perceiving mind, then truth results.

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<sup>119</sup>Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 47.

<sup>120</sup>Griffiths, *Apology*, 50.

It would appear that, in order for an argument to be advanced and not suffer ‘the death of a thousand qualifications,’ one must begin somewhere and with some type of presupposition in the quest for truth in religion. The ultimate presupposition, according to Christianity, is the self-revelation of God in his Son. Whether or not this comports with the biblical data, reason, and, experience must be demonstrated. It remains to be shown, then, that Jesus of Nazareth is the *Mystery* of God Incarnate. In an effort to spell out this doctrine, a logically consistent position on the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth that is historically responsible and biblically faithful will be defended.

## CHAPTER 4

## JESUS: THE MYSTERY OF GOD INCARNATE

**Coherence and Chalcedon**

On October 22, 451 A.D., the Church Fathers agreed on the orthodox teaching about Christ having two natures. It is this teaching that the Christian Church has embraced throughout the centuries as that which most cogently expresses the biblical notion of the Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. The Chalcedonian Confession is quoted here for convenience.

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance [*homoousious*] with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer [*Theotokos*] one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized IN TWO NATURES, WITHOUT CONFUSION, WITHOUT CHANGE, WITHOUT DIVISION, WITHOUT SEPARATION; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person [*prosopon*] and subsistence [*hypostasis*], not as parted or separated into two persons [*prosopa*], but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and as our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has delivered to us.<sup>121</sup>

It is this confession I will seek to defend in the remainder of this thesis against John Hick's non-literal view of the incarnation. Hick claims the "orthodox task is to spell out in an intelligible way the idea of someone having both a fully divine nature, i.e. having all the essential divine attributes, and at the same time a fully human nature, i.e. having all the essential human attributes."<sup>122</sup> Moreover, Hick believes that the Chalcedonian formula is a "mystery rather than a clear and distinct idea," and that it is "not a divine mystery but one that was created by a group

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<sup>121</sup>Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 72-73, emphasis mine.

<sup>122</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 48.

of human beings.”<sup>123</sup> As was pointed out in the last chapter, the fact that it was a group of human beings has no bearing upon its truthfulness (*ad hominem*). The points I will challenge are: 1) Chalcedon is “created” rather than a deduction from inspired apostolic teaching; and 2) Chalcedon is unintelligible as to how Jesus of Nazareth could have *both* human *and* divine attributes simultaneously. I will address this second concern first.

Hick’s charge against Chalcedon is the incoherence of maintaining that one person may have all the necessary divine and human properties at the same time. Borrowing from Spinoza, Hick writes: “for to say, without explanation, that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square.” And, Hick states that “squareness and roundness . . . cannot both characterize the same plane figure.”<sup>124</sup> The doctrine of the incarnation is not, however, a matter of fitting different shapes into the same space. To say that God cannot incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth because Hick doesn’t understand *how* this could be, is to say a great deal about both God and humans. For one thing, Hick is implicitly saying that God and humans are mutually exclusive beings. Though it is true God is ontically distinct from his creation, it is not logically impossible for both ontologies to reside in one person *if God should so choose*. If God was indeed incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, then, regardless of human comprehension, that is what God could and did do.

However, it would appear that Hick is, once again, confusing categories, viz., numerical identity versus ontological identity. At Nicea (325 A.D.) Athanasius fought relentlessly for the notion of “consubstantiality” between the Father and the Son. That is, there is a numerical unity of substance (hence, *homo-ousious*) between God the Father and God the Son, yet the Father is not numerically identical with the Son. The seemingly logical absurdity that Hick insists upon is better understood in terms of “mystery” whereby the definitive locus for knowing God is in

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>Hick, *Myth*, 178.

Jesus of Nazareth, though our understanding cannot *fully* comprehend it. Though the idea of mystery is, by no means, sufficient to satisfy everyone, Loughlin reminds us that:

[mystery] does not say *how* God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. But it is a *non sequitur* to suppose that, because one cannot say *how* Jesus was and is the mystery of God with us and for us, one must deny *that* he was and is the mystery of human redemption and salvation. Human infirmity does not render the doctrine of the incarnation meaningless.<sup>125</sup>

The doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth would be a logical absurdity if one were to assert that Jesus both had the essential attributes of deity and, at the same time, did not have the essential attributes of deity. However, the position which upholds the Chalcedonian confession is that *some* of Jesus' attributes were divine and *some* were human. Contradictory statements are not the same as complex propositions, or sub-contrary relationships. An example of contradiction would be to assert that all of the people in the world are rich and, at the same time, claim that some of the people in the world are not rich. An example of a sub-contrary proposition would be to assert that some of the people in the world are rich and that some of the people in the world are not rich. As for the circle-square analogy, the response by Gordon Lewis merits repeating.

As a circle encompasses a square the two figures together form a more complex geometrical design. The whole complex pattern has two natures with both the attributes of the circle and the attributes of the square. We need not contradict ourselves in reference to the complex design if we affirm that some of the attributes of the complex design are those of a circle and some those of a square. The holistic unity of the design is not thereby divided. The two "natures" need not be confused. The circle remains a circle; the square within it remains a square. The one, "circle-square design" has two distinct natures. We can speak without contradicting ourselves of their essential differences as subcontraries.<sup>126</sup>

Given the biblical doctrine of the triune God (three distinct persons in one divine essence), Chalcedon affirms that Jesus of Nazareth is *numerically identical* with God the Son, the second person of the Trinity. It is meaningful to claim "Jesus is God" when this is intended to make an identity claim of essence, although the reciprocal statement, "God is Jesus," results

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<sup>125</sup>Loughlin, "Squares," 199.

<sup>126</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative*, vol. 2, 349.

in some difficulty.<sup>127</sup> No orthodox theologian who affirms Chalcedon would maintain that Jesus is numerically identical with God the Father. This is the error of Sabellianism. God the Son is, at once, *numerically identical* with Jesus of Nazareth and *essentially identical* with God the Father, because they share in the same divine substance.

Hence, Jesus of Nazareth, as God the Son, in order to be fully human and fully divine, must contiguously share in all the *essential* properties of both humanity and divinity. But, according to the principle of noncontradiction, it is logically impossible for any being to possess a property and its logical complement. A being cannot simultaneously be, for example, both necessary and contingent, omniscient and ignorant, omnipotent and humanly weak. But, if one person can have two ontologically or metaphysically distinct natures, then the possibility becomes greater for one being/person to possess two contradictory attributes. This raises other questions: “What are the essential and non-essential properties for being both human and divine? Is it possible that Jesus of Nazareth can have these apparently incompatible attributes simultaneously?”

Since the nineteenth century many theologians have offered some form of a *kenosis* theory, whereby God the Son during the incarnation divested himself of some or all of the divine attributes incompatible with being genuinely human. In Phil. 2:7, Jesus is said to have emptied himself (*ἐκένωσεν*) to become a man. Kenotic Christologies hold that divine attributes such as omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience were relinquished, or at least suspended, while God the Son was human.

Though beyond the scope of this chapter, I will offer just one difficulty with a *kenotic* Christology. According to Morris, it ends up being shipwrecked on the rock of divine immutability. Any being who is God cannot have begun to be God and then cease to be God. He is God immutably. For, to be God is to *eternally* and *maximally* possess the aggregate number of attributes essential to deity, the least of which are self-existence or ontological independence,

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<sup>127</sup>Cf., Murray J. Harris, *Jesus As God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 274-275.

immutability, omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, holiness (= moral perfection). For example, if “no divine being can cease to have any attribute partly constitutive of deity, and omniscience is partly constitutive of deity, God the Son cannot have ceased to be omniscient for a period of time.”<sup>128</sup>

A more recent approach to a kenotic Christology has been offered by Milliard Erickson, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest.<sup>129</sup> Rather than a *kenosis* Christology having the idea of subtracting any divine attribute in order to become human, the second person of the Trinity *added* a human nature to the divine nature; it is *kenosis by addition*. As a result, the divine nature was only limited in the *use* of all the essential attributes of deity. Erickson writes, “Jesus did not give up the qualities of God, but gave up the privilege of exercising them.”<sup>130</sup> Lewis and Demarest state that “the one person who came from God the Father added to himself a human nature.”<sup>131</sup>

Morris offers the possibility of a kenotic Christology that may work with divine immutability, though his idea is underdeveloped. He calls for a reconceptualization of the *kind-essential* properties (see below) of deity. Morris claims that certain “conditions or requisites of divinity, the properties ingredient in or constitutive of deity, are not simply the divine attributes such as omniscient or omnipresence (as standardly analyzed), but rather are properties composed of these attributes *qualified by* kenotic limitation properties.”<sup>132</sup> For example, omniscience would be qualified as the “property of being omniscient-unless-freely-and-temporarily-choosing-to-be-otherwise.”<sup>133</sup> The essential properties of deity would become a

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<sup>128</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 97.

<sup>129</sup>Milliard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 548-550; 555-565. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative*, vol. 2, 285-286.

<sup>130</sup>Erickson, *Word*, 550.

<sup>131</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative*, vol. 2, 343.

<sup>132</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 99, emphasis his.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*

compound property, rather than a property *simpliciter*. Morris' alternate kenotic view appears to be in accord with the *kenotic by addition* theory and has promising possibilities.

Despite whatever direction one pursues in order to develop a coherent view of Jesus' person, the metaphysical status of both humanity and deity is paramount to presenting a clear understanding of the Incarnation. If one begins with a faulty view of either the human or divine nature, then logical problems with the incarnation of Jesus will ensue. Therefore, it is imperative that a plausible view of both humanity and divinity be in place before offering a sufficient defense of Jesus as the Mystery of God Incarnate. The debate seems to turn on the idea of "nature." Whatever is meant by nature will determine the strength or weakness of the position one takes regarding a divine incarnation.

Much of what follows is taken from Thomas Morris' *The Logic of God Incarnate* as well as a more recent work entitled "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate." In response to Morris' book, Hick has published an article in *Religious Studies* entitled "The Logic of God Incarnate," in addition to a fuller development in his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. These works represent the current debate regarding Jesus' divine and human natures. I will interact with them, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, and in the final analysis, I will show how Hick's views cannot withstand Morris' arguments.

### **The Nature of "Natures"**

Every nature, human or otherwise, has an essence or set of properties necessary and sufficient for membership into a genus or category. For example, the property of oxygen is necessary for the constitutional make-up of water (H<sub>2</sub>O). If a container is said to be filled with water, but that substance lacks the property of oxygen, then the claim must be rejected as false. Similarly, if Jesus of Nazareth is said to be both human and divine, then he must simultaneously have the set of properties that are necessary and sufficient for membership into the genus or category of both humanity and divinity.

After arguing for the position that Jesus of Nazareth is identical with God the Son, the second person of the triune God, Morris makes an important move to distinguish between an

*individual-nature* and a *kind-nature*. An *individual-nature* consists of “the whole set of properties individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being numerically identical with *that individual*.”<sup>134</sup> This is similar if not the same as Duns Scotus’ principle of individuation, or “thisness,” (*haecceity*). Copleston explains, “a human being, for instance, is *this* composite being, composed of *this* matter and *this* form. The *haecceitas* does not confer any further qualitative determination; but it seals the being as *this* being.”<sup>135</sup>

Thus, the *individual-nature* of Jesus of Nazareth would, for instance, consist of being Mary’s firstborn. This is one of the properties Jesus of Nazareth had which no others shared in and without which he would not be the unique human individual that he was. Moreover, since logically there can be only one “firstborn,” and Jesus was it, then no one else could possibly participate in the property of “firstborn-ness” in *that* family.

Morris defines a *kind-nature* as a “sharable set of properties individually necessary and collectively sufficient for membership of that kind.”<sup>136</sup> The *kind-nature* is the way in which we categorize individual beings as part of *this* group, rather than *that* group. Humans are distinguished from all other living animals because we bear God’s image (“you may kill animals but not people *because* they are made in the image of God,” Genesis 9:1-6).<sup>137</sup> When we are told that a living individual being *x* shares in the properties of eating, breathing, and excreting, we recognize *x* could be classified as being either a person or a primate. If, however, the additional properties of discursive reasoning, moral sensitivities, and spiritual propensities are added to *x*, more than likely, we would classify *x* as a human person rather than a mere animal. Therefore, “humanity” is a *kind-nature* term. So too, divinity and all that it entails would be a *kind-nature* term. Morris says, with respect to *individual-* and *kind-natures* that

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<sup>134</sup>Ibid., emphasis his, 38.

<sup>135</sup>F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1962), book 1, vol. 2, emphasis his, 516-517.

<sup>136</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 39.

<sup>137</sup>Louis McBride, *Gordon Clark’s Definition of Person: An Analysis and Critique*, 7. I am indebted to him for this and many other contributions to this chapter.

no individual has more than one individual-nature. But of course it does not follow from this that no individual has more than one kind-nature. The conception of a kind-nature certainly does not in itself rule out by definition the possibility that there be a single individual with two such natures. And it is two natures of this sort which orthodox doctrine ascribes to Christ.<sup>138</sup>

At this point it becomes important to define what a property is. First, a property is a trait, characteristic, or attribute of something. Everything which exists has at least one property or feature. Even the notion of “nothing” has the property of “being devoid of properties.” While the property of “nothing” may be purely linguistic, having no ontic status, it is impossible for any entity that *exists* to have no properties. When something is predicated of a subject, for example, “this thesis is *x*,” then whatever substitutes for the variable designates a trait or property of this thesis. Likewise, persons have properties such as “big,” “tall,” “honest,” “married,” “single,” etc. It is impossible that persons not have some properties.

Second, properties are either *essential* or *nonessential*. An *essential property* is that which cannot be absent or modified in the subject in question without that subject ceasing to be the *kind* of thing that it is. For example, a stone has the property of being material. It is an essential property of a stone that it retain its materiality. However, the size or weight a stone takes, large or small, heavy or light, are examples of *nonessential properties*.

Unlike stones, material properties of humans are part of a greater whole. There are essential immaterial or nonphysical properties that constitute the human person as well (i.e., soul, reason, spirit, etc.). Some essential immaterial properties of God would be omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, aseity, and impeccability. Without these properties, God would no longer be God, in a traditional, orthodox Christian view. So, when Chalcedon affirms that Jesus of Nazareth is identical with God, then it is also affirming that he has all those immaterial properties essential to being God in addition to the material and immaterial essential properties of humanity. And he has them simultaneously.

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<sup>138</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 40-41.

A further distinction in Morris' argument is between *common* and *essential* properties. He claims that confusion results when common properties are thought to be essential in humans. *Essential human properties* are shared by all humans and are necessary to possess in order to be considered part of the human genus or family. *Common human properties* are those traits that humans typically possess. For example, lacking moral perfection (sinfulness) is common to all humankind, but is not an essential property. It is logically possible that mere humans not be sinful (as in the pre-Fall condition of Adam and Eve, or a post-resurrection glorified state). More on this later.

Some properties may be universally common to all, without being *essential* to humanity. For example, Morris makes the bold claim that contingency (presumably he means having a causal and/or chronological beginning) is a common, though not essential property of being of the *kind-essence* of humanity. Limitation properties (e.g., contingency) are certainly common to humans, and, presumably, universally common to humans.

Such properties as those of being contingent, created, non-eternal, non-omnipotent, non-omniscient, and non-omnipresent are certainly common to human beings. Apart from the case of Christ, they are even, presumably, universal human properties. But I submit that they are not kind-essential human properties. It is not true that an *individual* [one who is not simply human] must be a contingent being, non-eternal, and non-omnipotent in order to exemplify human nature. It is possible for an *individual* [one who essentially divine] to be human without being characterized by any of these limitation properties. And so it is possible for an *individual* who essentially lacks such properties, *an individual who is properly divine*, to take up at the same time a human nature.<sup>139</sup>

To be contingent is to have a limitation property and to have a limitation property is to be *merely* human (see below). These limitation properties are universally common to all who belong to the family of humanity, excepting Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, this would make a non-contingent individual more *superhuman* than *simply* human. And, this is precisely Morris' point regarding the Incarnation of Jesus.

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<sup>139</sup>Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, ed., Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 116-117, emphasis mine.

That Jesus' human nature is non-contingent is a notion I find extremely difficult to reconcile with a classical view of Jesus' humanity. After all, was not the human Jesus of Nazareth born into the time-space continuum of reality (Gal. 4:4)? Morris claims, however, that to have a limitation property (contingency) is part of our creatureliness, but not part of our human-ness.<sup>140</sup> It could be Morris is saying that, while all creatures (presumably those made in the image of God) are humans, not all humans are creatures. And, there is one, and only one, unique human who is not a creature—Jesus of Nazareth. Morris qualifies this notion of Jesus' non-contingent human nature by saying that it was not a metaphysical prerequisite to the Incarnation.

For God the Son to become human, he thus had to take on a human body and a human mind, with all that entails. He [as God the Son] did not have to become a created, contingent being. He [*qua* God] just had to take on a created, contingent body and mind of the right sort. And so he was born of Mary the virgin and lived a human life. . . . God the Son's taking on of a created, contingent body and mind does not entail that he himself was a created, contingent being . . . his taking on of a body and mind limited in knowledge, power, and presence does not entail that he himself, in his deepest continuing mode of existence [as God the Son], was limited in knowledge, power, or presence.<sup>141</sup>

It appears, then, that Morris is saying that Jesus *qua* human is contingent, but Jesus *qua* God is non-contingent. Jesus had a human body and mind with all the limitations thereof (excepting sin). At this point, however, the major contribution of Morris' categories is that *common properties* are shared by *most* humans, whereas *essential properties* are shared by *all* humans.

One final distinction is crucial to Morris' entire argument—the difference of being *merely* human as opposed to being *fully* human. Morris states that

an individual is fully human [in any case where] that individual has all essential human properties, all the properties composing basic human nature. An individual is *merely human* if he has all those properties *plus* some additional limitation properties, as well, properties such as that of lacking omnipotence, that of lacking omniscience, and so on.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 118, 121.

<sup>142</sup>Thomas V. Morris, "Understanding God Incarnate," in *Asbury Theological Journal* 43 (1988): 66, quoted in Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 88-89.

Put simply, we have two classes of humans, those who are *fully human* and those who are *merely human*. Both classes have all the essential properties of humanity and fall into the *kind-nature* of humanity, but *mere* humans have additional properties of limitation, i.e., lacking some property essential to deity. Against Morris, however, I submit, in accordance with Chalcedon, Jesus *qua* human did have limitation properties (apart from sin), whereas Jesus *qua* God did not. The orthodox claim regarding Jesus of Nazareth is that he was “truly human.”<sup>143</sup> If to be merely human entails having limitation properties, as Morris insists, and Jesus was “like us in *all* respects, apart from sin,” as Chalcedon insists, then Jesus shared in some limitation properties. Both Jesus and the entire category of humanity possess all the properties essential to being members in the class of humanity. And, Jesus *qua* human can possess our weaknesses and still be essentially God Incarnate. By “weaknesses” I mean practical, not moral. Jesus *qua* human hungered, thirsted, got tired, and eventually died, albeit, without moral failure.

Still, Morris states we are *fully* human with respect to having

all the properties constituting the kind-essence of humanity. *But we are merely human as well*: we have certain limitation properties in virtue of being God’s creatures. Those limitations need not be ingredient in our human-ness; only in our creatureliness. Thus, God the Son, through whom all things are created, need not have taken on any of those limitation properties distinctive of our creatureliness in order to take on a human nature. He could have become fully human without being merely human.<sup>144</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible for some limitation properties (already mentioned) to be ingredient in Jesus *qua* human without compromise of his essential deity. Note, however, Morris is saying that it is “God the Son” who did not have to change with respect to his divine person in order to take on a human nature. With this, I certainly agree. Yet, it is possible to have two classes of humans, *both of which are merely human*; the only distinguishing factor between them is that of sin. And all, excepting Jesus, share in this distinguishing factor. This would align Jesus more with the pre-Fall humanity of Adam, which is precisely what the biblical record seems to indicate (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:45).

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<sup>143</sup>See Chalcedon statement at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>144</sup>Morris, “Metaphysics,” emphasis mine, 117.

According to Morris, in the case of the Chalcedonian Confession the person of Jesus constitutes not only all those essential properties of being fully human, but his essential human nature is only part of a greater whole, that of subsisting within a divine nature. Moreover, if fundamental to humanness is having the property of being numerically distinct from all other persons and fundamental to God-ness is having the property of being numerically distinct from all other persons, and if Jesus was both God and human, then do we not have *two* numerically distinct beings (Jesus of Nazareth and God the Son) coexisting as one person? How can this be? Isn't this the Nestorian error?

It seems the best explanation would be to point out that the incarnation is a unique situation where the human nature *subsists* in the divine person such that the mind and will of Jesus of Nazareth always thinks and acts in accordance with God the Son. Rather than having two numerically distinct beings *coexisting* as the one person, we simply have an integration of the human nature into the divine nature, yet without confusion. As such, the human Jesus of Nazareth is ontically subordinate to and metaphysically dependent upon God the Son, the second person of the triune God. This, then, is what Chalcedon refers to as the hypostatic union of the two natures (divine and human) residing in the one person of Jesus. At the incarnation the divine person of Jesus is distributed, so to speak, throughout both a divine nature *and* a human nature such that the two natures are conjoined, yet distinct, into the one unique God-Man.

At this juncture, it is important to show that while God the Son is a person who assumed a human nature, this is not to say that God the Son was a human person. The eternal Logos, as the principle pre-existent subject (Jn. 1:1), is God the Son who took on and sustained a human nature (Jn. 1:14). Still, Jesus was human, but not only human. He was a divine person who took possession of a fully human nature. In addition, there is some notable difference between the notions of a 'human person' and a 'person who is human.' The orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation claims that *Jesus of Nazareth was a divine person who took on a human nature, not a human person who took on a divine nature.* His complex ontological constitution consists

of a divine person that assumed, at some point in history and now sustains, a particular human nature. And, if the divine person sustains Jesus' human nature, it is not too difficult to opt for Jesus possessing a contingent (viz., having-a-beginning-in-time) human nature.

An example from chemistry that demonstrates, though imperfectly, the uniqueness of Jesus' humanity will be helpful. The difference between a *mixture* and a *compound* is that in the former two distinct substances are joined together in the same container but are not chemically bound to one another, whereas a *compound* is the binding together of the substances in the same container to create a new substance (*tertium quid*). Jesus' humanity was such that the divine nature joined with a human nature to form a "mixture" of a divine-human person, not a new substance altogether. So, Chalcedon confesses that Jesus was one divine person with two distinct natures whereby "the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together" were one and the same person Jesus Christ.

"In the Incarnation God simply brings it about by a special act that a certain individual human nature [Jesus of Nazareth], exactly similar to every other in its ontological constitution and intrinsic inclinations, fails to satisfy the metaphysical conditions required for it to be a human *person*."<sup>145</sup> This is not to say that Jesus did not have a human nature. What is meant by "person" is different from what is meant by "nature." In fact, one way in which to avoid the Nestorian error is to posit one divine person with a human nature. "'Person' is an ultimate, ontological status term, not a composition term . . . having the status of exemplifying a human body-mind composite [is] not the deepest truth about the ontological status of that individual."<sup>146</sup> So, it is perfectly within orthodox Christianity to say that Jesus was not a human person, but a divine person with a human nature. One condition, according to Freddoso, that

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<sup>145</sup>Alfred J. Freddoso, "Human Nature, Potency and the Incarnation," in *Faith and Philosophy* (January, 1986): 33, emphasis mine. For references of St. Thomas' teaching against Nestorianism see the aforementioned work in the Appendix.

<sup>146</sup>Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology*, ed., C. Stephen Evans (Downers, Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 174.

marks out Jesus of Nazareth from the rest of all human persons is his inability or impotence to sustain himself *as a human person*. Every other human being has an integration between the human nature and the human person such that the latter necessarily sustains the former.

Hence, Freddoso concludes:

Christ's assumed nature does not differ from other individual human natures in any of its natural inclinations. It differs from the others only in that it has necessarily a *supernatural* property which the others lack necessarily. Still if *per possible* that nature were to exist without being sustained by a divine person, then it would, like other human natures, be a human person with all the foibles thereof.<sup>147</sup>

Jesus of Nazareth, thus, possessed the animating principle, that “deepest continuing mode of existence,” of the *divine* person, whereas all other humans possess the animating principle of a *human* person. It is as if an empty glove (= individual human nature of Jesus of Nazareth) is filled with a living Hand (= personal divine nature of God the Son) when God became Man, or the Word became flesh (John 1:14). This is not to promote any sort of docetic Christ. The glove is real, whereas the humanity of a docetic Christ is not. The illustration merely points to the over-arching metaphysical subject who is God the Son as a divine person who possesses a human nature. Therefore, any individual, whether human or divine, consists of both a person and a nature; the former being necessary to the latter. Jesus of Nazareth, therefore, as a unique individual, is one divine person who embodies both a human and a divine nature in a hypostatic union.

While it may be true that humanity and divinity are mutually exclusive realities, they are not mutually incompatible ones any more than color is incompatible with shape. Take for instance a red square. There is nothing inconsistent about squareness and redness residing in one entity. In fact, the red square is one entity comprised of two complex metaphysical realities, color and shape. Though the notions of “redness” and “squareness” are different ideas, they certainly involve no contradiction. Likewise, the fact that “humanity” and “divinity” are *different* does not necessarily make one the logical complement (contradiction) of the other.

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<sup>147</sup>Freddoso, “Human Nature,” 45.

Therefore, asserting that Jesus of Nazareth is both fully God and fully human does not wind up a contradictory notion, only a complex one. A more precise explanation of the relationship between the human and divine nature will follow. But first, I will offer some further objections by John Hick to the incarnation.

Revealing his commitment to empiricism and a nonliteral view of the Scriptures, Hick tries to highlight what he believes to be the absurdity of a literal incarnation by addressing the notion that in order to be human one must have human parents.

it is an essential characteristic [of humans] to have a certain type of genetic origin. . . . If this is a basic requirement for being human it presents difficulties for the traditional belief that Jesus had a human mother but no human father; for he would then have carried only half of the full human genetic complement.<sup>148</sup>

This would be true if God did not supply the other half of the genetic complement at the impregnation of Mary. Given a miraculous view of the Virgin Birth, however, the other half of the genetic complement being supplied by God is a logical possibility and, therefore, deserves more consideration than Hick seems willing to give.

Morris says that if “God directly produced Adam *ex nihilo* along with an entire universe to boot,”<sup>149</sup> then it is possible that humans need only share in a common genetic make-up as to our *individual-nature*. While it may be a common property of all humans to have two biological parents with respect to our *individual-nature*, it is not essential to the *kind-nature* of humanity that all have two biological parents. Hick admits that “*if* humanity began with the special creation of a fully-formed Adam and Eve we should have to amend the definition of humanity.”<sup>150</sup> Yet, his nonliteral hermeneutic (he calls a literal understanding of the creation account “fundamental,” a term which many in scholarly circles would find pejorative) precludes him from being able to grant this understanding of human nature.

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<sup>148</sup>John Hick, “The Logic of God Incarnate,” in *Religious Studies* 22 (December, 1989): 412.

<sup>149</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 68.

<sup>150</sup>Hick, “Logic,” 413.

According to Hick, a fundamental problem regarding the notion of Jesus of Nazareth having both a divine and human nature is that the essential properties of the *natural-kind* “humanity” are logically incompatible with the essential properties of the *natural-kind* “divinity.” Since Jesus has two natures, however, it becomes possible that he possess only one of them necessarily and the other contingently. A problem would result *if* Jesus possessed both a human and divine nature necessarily. The second Person of the Trinity has not always been human, but he has been and always will be divine. The traditional view of the Incarnation states that Jesus of Nazareth was fully human and fully divine. Morris writes,

it is an orthodox belief that God the Son now exemplifies human nature, yet has it contingently. This follows from the conviction that there was a time before the Son began to exemplify human nature, a time at which he was not a man and yet existed. Thus, though he exemplified humanity, he did not exemplify it essentially.<sup>151</sup>

Therefore, Jesus’ fully human nature does not preclude his divine person existing as a necessary, or ontologically independent being. If Jesus is an ontologically complex being whereby he has more than one *kind-nature*, then the possibility is open for him to possess “one of them only contingently or nonessentially.”<sup>152</sup> Hence, there exists in Jesus the individual a unique ontological classification whereby he possesses a fully human nature nonessentially or contingently and, at the same time, possesses his divine nature necessarily or essentially.

So, if this line of argumentation works, Jesus of Nazareth can be omnipotent with respect to his divine person and limited in power with respect to his human nature. Or, he can be omniscient with respect to his divine person and limited in knowledge with respect to his human nature. It is important to remember that it is not the divine nature *in se* (in its entirety) that became incarnate, but that God the Son, the second person of the triune God, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. That is, he took on all the essential properties of the *kind-nature* of humanity *in addition to* possessing the *kind-nature* of divinity, which he shares in full with

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<sup>151</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 41.

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

God the Father. Hence, charges of violating the immutability of God can be dropped as well as most versions of a kenotic Christology.

Though the ontological traits of God the Son were combined with the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth so as not to confuse them nor separate them, it is perfectly consistent with both biblical testimony and historical orthodoxy to say, for example, that Jesus was limited in knowledge in his human nature, but omniscient in his divine nature. Given his complex ontological status, this is not a logical contradiction; only a complex proposition. Yet, Hick takes issue with the interaction between the divine and human natures, particularly the mind(s) of Jesus.

### **Two-Minds Christology Reconsidered**

In order to uphold the Chalcedonian confession of two distinct natures in Jesus of Nazareth, one divine and the other human, Morris posits what he calls a *two-minds view of Christ*.<sup>153</sup> There are two distinct, though interrelated, ranges of consciousness in the person of Jesus. Morris writes:

the divine mind of God the Son contained, but was not contained by, his earthly mind, or range of consciousness. That is to say, there was what can be called an asymmetric accessing relation between the two minds . . . The divine mind had full and direct access to the earthly human experience resulting from the Incarnation, but the earthly consciousness did not have such a full and direct access to the content of the overarching omniscience proper to the Logos, but only such access, on occasion, as the divine mind allowed it to have. There thus was a metaphysical and personal depth to the man Jesus lacking in the case of every individual who is merely human.<sup>154</sup>

Although God has the equal and complete epistemic access to all human minds, Jesus had available to him limited access to the divine mind of God the Son. Those things present in Jesus' human mind were accessible to the divine mind, but not always vice versa. The divine mind exercised omniscience, though the human mind was limited in knowledge. As to the

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<sup>153</sup>Morris is careful, though only occasionally, to point out that his view avoids Nestorianism by using the notion of "mind" to denote some property a person *has* rather than what a person *is*. Cf., Morris, *Logic*, 102, n. 19. Incidentally, it is unfortunate that Gordon Clark claims the Fathers of Chalcedon were talking nonsense and that his Christology and anthropology opts, instead, for the Nestorian error. See his *The Incarnation* (Jefferson: The Trinity Foundation, 1988), esp. 75.

<sup>154</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 103.

“metaphysical and personal depth” of Jesus of Nazareth, Morris states that “the personal cognitive and causal powers operative in the case of Jesus’ earthly mind were just none other than the cognitive and causal powers of God the Son.”<sup>155</sup>

Hick’s charge is that Morris endows Jesus with less than a fully human nature. Should the human will begin to act contrary to the divine will, the divine side takes over and prevents Jesus the human from committing error. The ultimate dilemma in Morris’ scheme, according to Hick, turns on Jesus’ impeccability. Hick explains.

A composite mind whose determining element is divine . . . would not have freedom to act wrongly. The human part might intend to sin, but the divine part, being unable to sin, would necessarily over-rule or circumvent the intention. Such a person could not be tempted as we are tempted, or become good by overcoming temptation, and accordingly could not embody our human moral ideal.<sup>156</sup>

For Hick, the fatal blow to Morris’ view is the question never sufficiently answered, viz., “was Jesus free to commit sin?”<sup>157</sup> Morris avers that there is a metaphysical ownership of the divine mind over the human mind, and he admits not knowing exactly how to spell this out.<sup>158</sup> He concludes there are mysteries involved. To this I heartily agree. But, the issue of Jesus’ impeccability and Hick’s charges deserve more consideration.

The Apostle James tells us that God cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:13). The orthodox position states that Jesus is identical with God the Son. Yet Matthew 4:1-11 and Hebrews 2:18 say that Jesus was tempted and that those temptations were very real. It appears that an inconsistency arises on a cursory reading of some traditional Christian beliefs. It seems nonsensical, not to mention potentially heretical along Nestorian lines, to posit that “Jesus as God the Son could not sin, whereas Jesus as a human could sin.” Can this be reconciled?

One way in which Morris attempts to explain this dilemma is by stating that peccability (the ability to sin) is not essential to being fully human. In Morris’ words “the Christian

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<sup>155</sup>Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>156</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 59.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>158</sup>Morris, “Metaphysics,” 125-126. Cf., also Morris, *God*, 173-174.

theologian can, in all epistemic propriety, just deny that being such that one possibly sins is a property essential to being fully human.”<sup>159</sup> In other words, peccability (the ability to sin) may be common to all humans, excepting Jesus of Nazareth, but is not part of the *kind-nature*, only the *individual-nature* of all humans.

Hick’s contention is that if at every moment Jesus’ human will was superseded by the divine will, then Jesus could not have been genuinely, and hence humanly, free. Though Morris recognizes the sixth ecumenical Council of Constantinople (680-681 A.D.) condemned as the monothelite heresy the notion that Jesus did not have a human will, his position still ends up, according to Hick, embracing the view that Jesus had no human will. Morris gives credence to two wills, one humanly free, including being free to sin, but if he had in fact tried, the divine will would have intervened. Therefore, in reality, Jesus only had one will, according to Hick.<sup>160</sup>

Morris gives the analogy of someone who is placed in a room and told not to leave for two hours. Unknown to him, the door is locked so that he could not leave if he wanted. However, by his own free choice he does not try. Therefore, in one sense, he is free, yet in another sense he is not. Analogously, Jesus was free to sin, but unable to do so due to the governing constraints, unbeknownst to him, of the divine will.<sup>161</sup> Hick replies that it is certainly a “strange kind of freedom, depending as it does upon ignorance.”<sup>162</sup>

However, this notion of freedom does not so much “depend” upon ignorance as it works *in conjunction with* a lack of knowledge. One could have the knowledge that the door is locked and still freely choose to remain in the room. Knowledge, therefore, is inconsequential to human choice. It seems a *non sequitur* to make human choices dependent upon knowledge. Though knowledge may be involved in human choices, the relationship of cognition to behavior isn’t always causal (cf., esp. Romans 7:7, 8; James 4:17). Knowledge is simply knowledge; it is

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<sup>159</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 142.

<sup>160</sup>Hick, “Logic,” 422.

<sup>161</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 151.

<sup>162</sup>Hick, “Logic,” 422.

not willpower. People are often incited to rebel by the very limitations put upon them. More often than not, it seems that when we are told *not* to do something we inevitably conclude there must be something “fun” about doing it and proceed anyway. Knowledge alone of what is virtuous is insufficient for causing one to pursue or not pursue virtue (contra Plato).

In addition, Morris alleges there are different notions that are conceptually linked with temptation. While it is *epistemically possible* for Jesus to sin, this does not entail its *physical possibility*. This is not to say that Jesus wasn't genuinely tempted; only that he did not, in reality, succumb to temptation. Morris claims that “a full accessible belief-set of a person at a time consists in all and only those beliefs which are accessible to a range of conscious thought and deliberation of that person at that time sufficient to support the initiation of action.”<sup>163</sup> For example, one who has been secluded between the years of 1863 and 1866 may be compelled to lie to Abraham Lincoln in a personal letter and not know that he died in 1865. While it is *epistemically possible* for the act of lying to take place, it would not be physically possible.

Hence,

Jesus could be tempted to sin just in case it was epistemically possible for him that he sin. If at the times of his reported temptations, the full accessible belief-set of his earthly mind did not rule out the possibility of his sinning, he could be genuinely tempted, in that range of consciousness, to sin.<sup>164</sup>

In his earthly stream of cognition, then, it was epistemically possible for Jesus to be tempted to sin, *if and only if in his earthly consciousness he did not contain the notion of his absolute goodness which he shared with God the Son*. Moreover, if the modal properties of Jesus *qua* God had no causal role in Jesus *qua* human resisting temptation as Hick seems to insist (though it is not necessary that they do per our view of pre-Fall humanity), then it is possible that the fully human Jesus of Nazareth freely and responsibly chose not to yield to temptation and so can and does “embody our human moral ideal.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup>Morris, *Logic*, 148.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid.

<sup>165</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 59.

In the final analysis it is not impossible that God unite with humanity. Essential humanity and essential deity are not necessarily logical complements or contradictory ontological natures. The two minds and the two wills of the God-Man belong to one integrated person. The human mind and the human will of Jesus of Nazareth, though ontologically distinct from the divine mind and will, were not a set of causal and cognitive powers wholly at odds with those of God the Son's causal and cognitive powers. The point at which the divine and human minds intersect is in the one unique, though ontologically complex, integrated person who is Jesus of Nazareth, the God-Man. Having said this, I will offer some final thoughts in defense of the Chalcedonian statement.

### **The Christology of Chalcedon**

The Council of Chalcedon opposed the two extremes of Eutychianism and Nestorianism (the former failing to distinguish between the two natures of Christ, the latter failing to unite the two natures). It is not the definitive statement that closes the door on every subsequent inquiry into the nature and person of Jesus of Nazareth. If anything, it opens doors for further reflection. It is unfortunate that Hick dismisses it. That Jesus is *both* human *and* divine is the major contribution of the Confession. *How* this can be is, admittedly, not clearly defined by Chalcedon. In its own historical context as well as ours, the Chalcedonian Confession makes a substantial contribution to New Testament Christology by encapsulating what the Scriptures teach regarding the person of Jesus.

It is true that philosophical terms were used to describe what the Chalcedonian Fathers believed New Testament witness intended concerning the person of Jesus. However, in the Greek autograph of Chalcedon (there was also a Latin translation) virtually every word can be found in a standard *Κοινὴ* (common) Greek lexicon. More significantly, given the subject matter and theological expertise of the authors of Chalcedon, it is an amazingly simple document in its brevity and ordinary phrasing.

The fact that the Confession was set in common language is due to the concern for “contextualizing” the orthodox message. R. H. Fuller makes a valuable contribution along these lines.

If the church was to preserve and proclaim the gospel in the Graeco-Roman world, it had to answer in terms of an ontology which was intelligible to that world. . . . We must recognize the validity of this achievement of the church of the first five centuries within the terms in which it operated. *It is sheer biblicism to maintain that the church should merely repeat “what the Bible says”—about Christology as about anything else.* The church has to proclaim the gospel into the contemporary situation. And that is precisely what the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedon formula were trying to do.<sup>166</sup>

A very important concern is not whether philosophical jargon was used, but if what was ascribed to by Chalcedon accurately reflects the New Testament writer’s beliefs about Jesus. It simply isn’t fair of Hick to claim that Chalcedon has “no clearly spelled out meaning attached to it.”<sup>167</sup> By the same line of reasoning, one could assert that Hick’s entire book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* has no clearly spelled out meaning, since it does not have an exegetical commentary and English lexicon attached to it. Yet, when one reads a book it is taken for granted that the meaning of words, sentences, and ideas don’t require such explication. So it is with Chalcedon. It means what it says and says what it means. Behind each of the more important terms used in the Confession lies a particular semantic domain, yet it is left to the reader to have in place the range of meaning attached to a given word that is in keeping with the original intent. This is true of any document, regardless of its age. To say the Chalcedon Confession is without specific meaning because we are chronologically removed some 15 centuries is historically naïve and linguistically irresponsible.

Though couched in the Greek language and thought of the day, the Christology of Chalcedon is theologically and intellectually “un-Greek,” in that it brought challenges to Greek culture to accept something that could not be fully comprehended. This demonstrates the Fathers’ commitment to the New Testament evidences. Hence, “the Chalcedonian Fathers were

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<sup>166</sup>Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 249-250, emphasis mine.

<sup>167</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 48.

accepting, and giving conciliar authority to, what had had its place in the Church's Christological thought from earliest days."<sup>168</sup> Moreover, uniting God and humanity was anathema to Greek thought, particularly with the well-developed strains of Gnosticism. The material world was considered intrinsically evil and various levels of mediation were posited between God and humans. There were plenty of mediators (more specifically, emanations), none of which were thought of as being fully divine and fully human simultaneously. Though there was considerable metaphysical baggage from Greek philosophy in the Chalcedonian Confession, the overarching concern was fidelity to the New Testament witness of Jesus of Nazareth. C. Gunton's remarks are entirely appropriate.

To say that the symbol of Chalcedon is couched in the conceptuality of its time— what other conceptuality could it have used?—is not to deny its candidature for truth, and in two senses: as an accurate summary of what the New Testament says about Jesus and as the truth about who Jesus is.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup>R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon* (London: SPCK, 1953), 217. Also, cf., A. N. S. Lane, "Christology Beyond Chalcedon," in *Christ the Lord*, ed., H. H. Lowden (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 263. Also, for a brief, but clear, defense of Chalcedonian language and culture see Erickson, *Word*, 513-516.

<sup>169</sup>Colin Gunton, "Using and Being Used: Scripture and Systematic Theology," in *Theology Today* (1990) 47:231.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE BIBLE AND THE MYSTERY OF GOD INCARNATE

#### Some Historical-Critical Considerations

The historical Jesus did not make the claim to deity that later Christian thought was to make for him: he did not understand himself to be God, or God the Son, incarnate. Divine incarnation . . . requires that an eternally pre-existent element of the Godhead, God the Son or the divine Logos, became incarnate as a human being. But it is *extremely* unlikely that the historical Jesus thought of himself in any such way. Indeed he would probably have rejected the idea as blasphemous.<sup>170</sup>

This is John Hick's chief allegation against the orthodox teaching regarding the deity of Christ in the Christian Church. Jesus' deity was conferred on him by others and is not what he believed about himself. Therefore, the traditional position of the Christian Church, which has stood throughout the centuries, is entirely wrong in its essential beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth.

The burden of proof, at least historically, lies with those who intimate that a continuity exists between the self-understanding of Jesus and what the New Testament writers subsequently wrote about him. If it can be shown that the New Testament is unreliable, then Christianity has no firm basis upon which to make substantial claims about Jesus. If, however, it can be demonstrated that the biblical witness is faithful to Jesus' self-referential claims, ascribing to him no more or no less than what he himself believed, then it stands that the Christian Scriptures are reliable historical testimony regarding the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Hick declares of those who take C. S. Lewis' apologetic that "someone claiming to be God must be either mad, or bad, or God; and since Jesus was evidently not mad or bad he must have been God. . . . continue to be unacquainted with *modern bible study*."<sup>171</sup> Christians must recognize, according to Hick, that it is erroneous, under nineteenth- and twentieth-century

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<sup>170</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 27, emphasis his.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., emphasis mine, 29.

“historical scrutiny,” to move from “Jesus’ own claim to the much less certain ground of the church’s subsequent attempts”<sup>172</sup> to affirm his deity.

This is an important critique leveled against the modern church. After all, Lewis’ ‘trilemma’ is assuming something Hick is not, namely, “that the gospels [in addition to the rest of the New Testament] give entirely accurate accounts of the actions and claims of Jesus.”<sup>173</sup> Blomberg says if one accepted the Gospel record as “legend,” then a fourth possibility is introduced against Lewis’ ‘trilemma,’ allowing the possibility of denying Jesus’ deity. This is precisely the move Hick makes, appealing to liberal, though “modern,” New Testament scholarship. He conveniently ignores other modern attempts that sufficiently demonstrate the historical reliability of the New Testament documents.<sup>174</sup>

Hick demonstrates his view of the historicity of the Bible when he states that it is widely agreed that the earliest New Testament documents—some of the letters of Paul—were written about twenty years after Jesus’ death (i.e. around 50 CE), with the earliest of the Gospels, that of Mark, some twenty years later and the remainder during the next thirty or so years, moving towards the end of the century. *None of the writers was an eye-witness of the life that they depict. The Gospels are secondary and tertiary portraits dependent on oral and written traditions which had developed over a number of decades. . . . We also have to remind ourselves that the Gospels were written, in a period between forty and seventy years after the time of Jesus, in a quite different cultural milieu from that of the original events.*<sup>175</sup>

Hick appears to follow somewhat conservative scholarship with respect to New Testament dating. But, what about the charge that none of the writers (presumably of the Gospels) were eyewitnesses? Though Mark and Luke were not, Matthew and John were. External evidence dated from the late second century claiming John, the son of Zebedee and one of the twelve, authored both the Fourth Gospel and the three epistles of John is virtually unanimous.<sup>176</sup> Still, Luke claims that he made use of eyewitness accounts as well as other resources available to him

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<sup>172</sup>Ibid.

<sup>173</sup>Blomberg, *Reliability*, xx.

<sup>174</sup>See, above n. 63, Chapter 2.

<sup>175</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 16, 17, emphasis mine.

<sup>176</sup>Cf., D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 23-29. Also, see 1 John 1:1-3 where the author, regardless of who it is thought to be, claims to be an eyewitness.

in faithfully and accurately recording Jesus' teachings (Luke 1:1-4). The Gospels are different portraits of the same objective reality—Jesus of Nazareth.

Moreover, because Jesus' biographers were eyewitnesses of his life, death, and resurrection, Hick is correct in his assessment that the Gospels are "secondary and tertiary portraits dependent on oral and written traditions which had developed over a number of decades." This does not, however, require that the Gospel records are unreliable history. Granted, the culture was "not one of the written word but of the spoken word."<sup>177</sup> Also, it is true that the oral world stands between what Jesus said and what was subsequently written down. But, just *how* different was the cultural milieu from the actual events of Jesus' life and teaching? Even if it were substantially different, and Hick gives no reasons to believe it was, he does not show how the few decades between Jesus' life and the penning of the New Testament *necessarily* results in unreliable teaching about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is possible to have historically reliable truth while writing it down at some later time.

The dating of some early New Testament works, which is in accordance with Hick's own dating, would probably put 1 Thessalonians around 50 A.D. and Galatians possibly earlier. This significantly reduces the time between Jesus' death and a fully-developed Christology to approximately twenty years. It is unlikely that the Apostle Paul simply imagined his Christology on the spot at the time of his writing. In addition, if Paul did presume his Christology spontaneously, there would be little, if any, reason for accepting his teaching as true. If this were the case, then some explanation would have to be given as to how so many could have been deceived.

The integrity of Paul's teaching is evidenced in his desire to be held historically accountable. He was careful to mention when he had preserved and passed on what he received regarding gospel tradition, and when he had not received some previously held teaching (cf., 1 Cor. 7:10, 12; 15:3; 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; Tit. 3:8; 2 Tim. 2:11). Also, there are two Pauline texts of

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<sup>177</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 74.

Christian hymns or poetry which indicate previous familiarity that were most likely dated not later than the 50s (Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20).<sup>178</sup> It seems, then, that this short time would virtually rule out any gradual evolution of Christology for the early Church.<sup>179</sup>

Moreover, the charge that Hick seems to be leveling against the New Testament writers is that they created sayings of Jesus and put words in his mouth. This assumes a fluidity in the oral tradition that, more than likely, was not there. Being an oral, pre-literate culture, there were well-established standards in the recording of authentic history during biblical times. Though the author's right to summarize rather than cite every word was recognized, there was an intense concern for accuracy in what counted as history, both in the Greco-Roman tradition and the Jewish tradition.<sup>180</sup> An accurate memory is necessary in preserving *ipsissima verba* or *ipsissima vox*.<sup>181</sup> The primary issue is between summary versus citation. But, as Bock reminds us, "it is possible to have historical truth without always resorting to explicit citation."<sup>182</sup>

If the Gospel writers intended to present word-for-word accounts of Jesus' teachings, but instead summarized, then there is a problem with the integrity of the New Testament record. But, if the Gospel writers merely intended to summarize Jesus sayings and did so, then their accounts should be judged on the basis of their intention, and nothing more. It is possible that God inspired the Gospel writers to give *their* account of Jesus' teachings. Feinberg says "if the sense of the words attributed to Jesus by the writers was not uttered by Jesus, or if the exact

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<sup>178</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>179</sup>I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 40-41. Cf., Galatians 1:11-12; 4:4; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23 for examples of Paul's high Christology.

<sup>180</sup>For excellent examples of this in the recording of Greco-Roman history and Jewish history see Bock, "Words," 78-81. Also see n. 7, 11, 12 at the end of the chapter for references on the historiography of the two traditions.

<sup>181</sup>*Ipsissima verba* literally means "exact words" whereas *ipsissima vox* means "exact voice" or the presence of Jesus' teaching summarized. It should be noted that since Jesus, more than likely, spoke Aramaic, closing the gap between *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima vox* is considerably more difficult. However, language translation does not seriously impugn trustworthy historiography.

<sup>182</sup>Bock, "Words," 75.

words of Jesus are so construed that they have a sense never intended by Jesus,”<sup>183</sup> then one such as Hick would have a basis for this implicit charge. However, the burden of historical proof would be upon him, or others, to show that the New Testament record is unreliable in recording Jesus’ teachings. Bock nicely summarizes:

One can present history accurately whether one quotes or summarizes teaching or even mixes the two together. To have accurate summaries of Jesus’ teaching is just as historical as to have his actual words; they are just two different perspectives to give us the same thing. All that is required is that the summaries be trustworthy—a factor made likely not only by the character of the writers and the nature of their religious convictions, but also by the presence of opponents and eyewitnesses who one way or the other could challenge a fabricated report.<sup>184</sup>

It would appear, then, that Hick offers little substantive support for claiming the New Testament is unreliable history. Assuming something to be so does not make it so. That is, to suppose that the time-gap significantly altered the disciples’ beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth does not entail there being a noteworthy shift in memory, nor a loose oral approach. In addition, looking at the events and sayings of Jesus’ life through the eyes of a resurrected Christ may involve some human interpretation, but this is a far cry from proving that what was recorded is unreliable history. It is logically possible that the humans who interpreted the events and sayings of Jesus were inspired to do so inerrantly as they wrote down their thoughts. And, it is theologically necessary that God inspired the human authors *if* the Bible is indeed *God’s* Word. Therefore, this appeal to the decades intervening between the life of Jesus and the recording of the New Testament documents does nothing to disprove the historical validity of the New Testament witness.

Hick is not alone in his claim that the material in the New Testament reflects early Christian thinking rather than of Jesus himself. R. Bultmann states that “Jesus’ call to decision [namely, to commit to the kingdom of God] implies a christology,”<sup>185</sup> but he does not allow for

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<sup>183</sup>Paul Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed., Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 301.

<sup>184</sup>Bock, “Words,” 88.

<sup>185</sup>R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (1952), I, p. 43. Quoted in Marshall, *Origins*, 29.

Jesus to have drawn this implication himself. However, Marshall makes an important observation: “how could Jesus adopt the position of the proclaimer of the kingdom of God and yet not determine his own relation to the kingdom?”<sup>186</sup> With all continuity gone between the recording of Jesus’ teaching and what he believed about himself, one may as well do away with the historical Jesus altogether. Yet, Bultmann and Hick do not go this far.

So, “if it is not true that Jesus refrained from expressing a Christology, then some at least of the earliest Christology goes back to his sayings and not simply to the creative genius of the early church.”<sup>187</sup> Conversely, if it is true that Jesus refrained from expressing a Christology, then none of the earliest Christology goes back to his sayings and the Christological claims *are* an interpolation by the early Church. It remains to be shown that some assertions which the writers of the New Testament make regarding the identity of Jesus of Nazareth are in accordance with his own self-referential claims.

### **Some Biblical Considerations**

In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Hick states that Jesus did not think of himself as God the Son. He also says that “the most important fact about Jesus must have been his strong and continuous awareness of God as *abba*, ‘father.’”<sup>188</sup> Therefore, it seems that Jesus’ own use of the expressions “Son” and “Son of God” will help us focus upon his filial consciousness. Hick suggests that many passages (e.g., Matt. 11:27; Mk. 13:32) have had their authenticity seriously questioned. He quotes James Dunn’s conclusion that we are unable to give a clear historical answer, and turns to the problem of interpreting a text in light of a pre-conditioned [Chalcedonian?] Christology.<sup>189</sup> His primary contention is with the so-called development of the early Church’s Christology and how it changed over time, though he is

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., Marshall, *Origins*, 29.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>188</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 18.

<sup>189</sup>James Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM Press, and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 29. Quoted in *ibid.*, 33.

mainly concerned with those passages having to do with Jesus' sonship. Explaining his historical concerns, Hick writes:

Provisionally, I see his [Paul's] thought as roughly a third of the way along the historical path leading from the honorific designation of the human Jesus as 'son of God', and then more particularly as 'the son of God' (with the capital S in due course supplanting the lower case), and finally, after several centuries of debates, as God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity.<sup>190</sup>

However, Blomberg wisely reasons that "if it is unfair to begin historical enquiry by superimposing a theological interpretation over it, it is equally unfair to ignore the theological implications that arise from it."<sup>191</sup> Hence, if it can be shown that some New Testament passages are authentic sayings of Jesus' *ipsissima vox*, or *ipsissima verba*, then the dispute over what Jesus thought of himself is considerably minimized. It is to some of these passages that I now turn.

In Matt. 11:27 (= Lk. 10:22) Jesus claims that his Father (i.e., God, cf., vv. 25-26) and the Son (himself) share a reciprocal and unique knowledge of each other. The text reads: "all things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." This passage is not found in Mark and, therefore, is most likely in the "Q" sayings which predate all four Gospel accounts.<sup>192</sup> This would put it very close, chronologically, to Jesus' utterance. Moreover, since Jesus frequently referred to God as Father, and if he was in the habit of speaking of himself in the third person, then there is no good reason to doubt that he referred to himself as "the Son" (cf., Matt. 8:20; 12:8; Mk. 8:38; 9:31; Lk. 9:22; 18:8; Jn. 3:13-14; 13:31-32). Put differently, "if Jesus' use of Abba is authentic, then his language about sonship in Matthew

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<sup>190</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>191</sup>Blomberg, *Reliability*, 257.

<sup>192</sup>"Q" is understood to be a hypothetical written source of Jesus' teachings (approx. 250 verses) common to both Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark. Verbal parallelisms between these non-Markan sayings of Jesus strongly suggests the existence of a common written source available to both Matthew and Luke. On the pros and cons of positing the existence of such a source, as well as relevant bibliographic information, cf., D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1992), 34-36.

11:27 par. should also be accepted.”<sup>193</sup> And if his language about sonship is accepted, it is a short distance to accept what he says about his unique relationship with God the Father. Indeed, there is no reason not to.

Earlier in the same passage, Jesus addressed God as “Father” (vv. 25, 26). In Matt. 11:27 he declares himself to be a Son in the exclusive sense of mediating knowledge of the Father to whomever he chooses. This presupposes a unique relationship of the Son to the Father. Especially interesting is the claim that “no one knows the Son except the Father.” This is a claim no mere mortal could make, since what is known of the Son is available only to the Father and no other. Craig states that since the “verse says the Son is unknowable [as to his essential identity as God], which is not true for the post-Easter Church . . . This strongly implies a pre-Easter origin of the saying.”<sup>194</sup> More astounding, however, is the claim that “no one knows the Father except the Son.” In effect, Jesus is saying that persons must acquire their knowledge of God from him.

“No one knows the Father except the Son and *those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*” is Jesus’ claim to be God’s Son in an absolute and sovereign sense. He is the *only one* who can reveal the Father. This sovereignty in revealing the Father is because of Jesus’ unequalled relationship to God the Father; a relationship that no other could possess. Though a filial consciousness is involved between Jesus and God the Father, it is like no other.

The uniqueness of the relationship is seen in Jesus’ claim to know and reveal the Father to whomever he pleases. This is not just another expression of a father and son relationship. The relationship Jesus has with God the Father is a peculiar one. To have mutual knowledge of God the Father is to have the mind of God. To have the exclusive right to reveal God the Father is to possess the sovereignty of God. As Reymond states, “a higher expression of parity between the

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<sup>193</sup>Blomberg, *Reliability*, 251.

<sup>194</sup>Craig, *Reasonable*, 246.

Father and the Son in possessing divine knowledge and sovereignty and dispensing saving knowledge is inconceivable.”<sup>195</sup>

More importantly, if Matt. 11:27 is a “Q” saying, then it seriously upsets the notion of an evolving Christology. This pre-Johannine statement by Jesus dissolves the idea of a steady development toward a Johannine Christology. Hence, Matthew and Luke (cf., Lk. 10:22) must have already had in place the possibility of a deity Christology. Simply because some of the Gospel writers do not explicitly make all, or even some Christological claims in the way that, say, John did (e.g., pre-existence of the Word, cf., Jn. 1:1), does not mean they did not believe them. Silence concerning an idea is not the same as ignorance of that idea.

The primary focus of Jesus’ prayer is on the flow of revelation. Revelation passes from the Father to the Son, who in turn passes that revelation on to those whom the Son chooses. The process is that the Father, whom Jesus has already identified as “the Lord of heaven and earth,” commits both knowledge and authority to the Son, whom Jesus has identified as himself. This unique mutual knowledge of God the Father guarantees that the revelation the Son gives is true. There is tremendous emphasis put upon Jesus’ person and authority by Matthew.

Moreover, if this passage is read in light of earlier Christological beliefs that had already come to be accepted, it is hardly difficult to dismiss it for what it actually says and means. For example, no less than eleven times is Jesus referred to as the “Lord Jesus” in 1 Thessalonians (1:1, 3; 2:15, 19; 3:11, 13; 4:1, 2; 5:9, 23, 28). Including Galatians we have an additional three times where Jesus is explicitly referred to as Lord in early New Testament writing (1:3; 6:14, 18). It is important to see that the Father and the Son are named together as the origin of salvation and the attributes of the one are the attributes of the other (Gal. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1).

Furthermore the pre-existence of the Son of God, who’s identified as Jesus of Nazareth, is clearly not a late development (cf., Gal. 4:4f). Paul is able to say that he did not receive his apostleship from a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Gal. 1:1). The close

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<sup>195</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1990), 73.

proximity of Jesus to God in Gal. 1:1, and the contrasting of Jesus and God to “men,” demonstrates that Paul puts Jesus on the divine side of reality.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, this early attestation of a ‘God the Son Christology’ puts Matthew 11:27 in a far more defensible light, historically speaking.

At Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, he was asked by Caiaphas if he claimed to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:63 = Mk. 14:61; Lk. 22:70). Jesus replied he was the Son of Man who would one day sit in judgment over them (Mk. 14:62). The response of the High Priest (Mk. 14:63), and the entire Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:64) is clear that they understood him to claim deity, not strictly as a political Messiah, but as the Son of God.<sup>197</sup> It is only fitting that Jesus’ titles come together as the Son of God, Son of Man/Judge, and Messiah at the culmination of his divine mission (Mk. 14:61-62).

While John’s Gospel gives the most detailed description of Jesus’ trial before Pilate (Jn. 18:29-38), the trial itself is paralleled in the Synoptic accounts. When asked by Pilate if Jesus was the King of the Jews, the Synoptics have him answering affirmatively (Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3). However, the expression Jesus used is actually quite ambiguous.<sup>198</sup> This may be because Jesus did not want to admit he was the Messiah *in the sense* that Pilate understood.

Furthermore, just prior to this Jesus stood before Caiaphas and was specifically asked “Are you the Christ?” (Matt. 26:63-64). Mark has Jesus clearly answering “I am” (Mk. 14:62).<sup>199</sup> Jesus was not confused, nor were his biographers. The reason for the disparity between Jesus’ answers was, more than likely, that Pilate’s sense of a Messiah and Caiaphas’ sense of a Messiah were quite different; the former was political, while the latter was primarily spiritual.

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<sup>196</sup>I. H. Marshall, *Jesus the Savior: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 209.

<sup>197</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, hereafter *TNT*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 168.

<sup>198</sup>Marshall suggests the statement could be a denial. See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 853.

<sup>199</sup>The variant reading on this text is, according to Walter Wessel, unsupported and he opts for the shorter reading. See Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 770.

The designation “Son of Man” for Jesus is found eighty-one times in the four Gospels; sixty-nine in the Synoptics. Of the thirty occurrences in Matthew, thirteen are with reference to an *eschatological* Son of Man, ten refer to a *soteriological* Son of Man who suffers; seven occur in the context of an *earthly* Son of Man.<sup>200</sup> Mark reports sayings of Jesus from all three classifications, “Q” has only one saying regarding a suffering motif, while Matthew and Luke contain numerous sources of the earthly and eschatological motifs.<sup>201</sup>

It is significant that Jesus alone used this designation for himself. In fact, one criterion of form criticism (= pre-Gospel, oral tradition) is *dissimilarity*. Those sayings which have no parallel in either Judaism or the early church are, more than likely, authentic. The idea that the “Son of Man would appear on earth in humiliation to suffer and die has no parallel in Judaism or in the early church.”<sup>202</sup> Hence, the Son of Man title may very well have been Jesus’ own self-designated title. Moreover, this title is found only once outside the four Gospels, which may indicate that “the designation of Jesus as ‘Son of Man’ was not a title that arose in later Christian usage and was then read back into the gospels.”<sup>203</sup>

As *the earthly Son of Man*, Jesus has the divine prerogative to forgive sins and has authority over the Sabbath (Mk. 2:10; 28 = Matt. 9:6 = Lk. 5:24; Matt. 12:8 = Lk. 6:5). The Son of Man has the prerogative not merely to *pronounce* sins forgiven but actually grant forgiveness of sins.<sup>204</sup> This can only be done by God. Once again the *dissimilarity* criterion demonstrates the strong possibility for this saying to be historically authentic.

Jesus is hardly implying merely a human messianic claim, for there is apparently no Jewish tradition that the Messiah or any other creaturely being has the right to forgive sins on his own authority. Furthermore, Jesus does not speak as an agent, priestly or

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<sup>200</sup>For references see D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 209-210.

<sup>201</sup>Cf., Ladd, *TNT*, 148-150.

<sup>202</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>203</sup>William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 243.

<sup>204</sup>Contra Hick, *Metaphor*, 32. Cf., J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law. Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster, 1990), 27.

prophetic or angelic, assuring the man of God's forgiveness, nor does he offer the provisional pardon of a human court to be later ratified by God. He makes a flat affirmation of what he and the theologians know to be a prerogative of God.<sup>205</sup>

As the *soteriological Son of Man*, Jesus is the suffering servant (Mk. 8:32; 10:45). Israel's suffering was always in the context of war or national sin. However, the Son of Man's suffering is done as a vicarious sacrifice. The Jewish mind could not fathom this idea. The allusion to Isaiah 53 in Mk. 10:45 has some interesting parallels, for example, the offering as a ransom for sin (compare Is. 53:10 with Mk. 10:45). Also, the "many" refer to a people for whom the Servant would suffer (Mk. 10:45; Is. 53:11). Additionally, Matt. 20:28 gives explicit reference to the purpose of the Servant's suffering, Luke quotes Jesus as "one who serves" (Lk. 22:27), and John illustrates Jesus' service in the washing of the disciple's feet (Jn. 13:4-5, 12-17; comp. also, Matt. 12:40; Mk. 14:21; Lk. 11:30).

The *eschatological Son of Man* is, without question, the most controversial. Yet there are three sayings included in each account of the Synoptics: Mk. 8:38 (= Matt. 16:27; Lk. 9:26), Mk. 13:26 (= Matt. 24:30; Lk. 21:27), and Mk. 14:62 (= Matt. 26:64; Lk. 22:69). Jesus' reply to the High Priest before the Sanhedrin is pointed: "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64, also see, Matt. 24:27, 30). The response of the high priest is a clear indication that he understood Jesus' claim to deity.

It is also possible that God's very presence, as represented in the temple, was somehow violated by someone "sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One." In fact,

the idea of anyone sitting in God's presence was offensive to many rabbis . . . the temple *and those things and the Person whose presence it represents* were viewed with a special sense of holiness. Everything about practice at the temple declared its sanctity and thus the sanctity of heaven and the God who dwells there. It is this background that explains why Jesus' remark would be seen as blasphemous.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup>E. Earle Ellis, "Deity-Christology in Mark 14:58," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 194.

<sup>206</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "The Son of Man and the Debate over Jesus' 'Blasphemy,'" in *Jesus of Nazareth*, 189, emphasis his. See esp., the quotes from Jewish sources in *ibid.*

The thought of Jesus being in that position was the ultimate blasphemy as far as Jewish leaders were concerned. In effect, Jesus is saying the High Priest has no right to sit in judgment over him. “Rather than the leadership having the right to judge Jesus, this Galilean teacher was claiming the right to represent God’s way and be their judge.”<sup>207</sup>

The perplexity over this title is evident by those who asked “Who is this ‘Son of Man?’” (Jn. 12:34). This is clearly a link to Jesus’ suffering. Even his closest disciples could not comprehend a “Son of Man coming in all his glory” who must first suffer and die on behalf of others (Matt. 16:13-16). The divine mission of Jesus as the exalted Son of Man who was to return in power and glory was imminently connected to a cross. Palestinian Judaism expected a triumphant and eternal Son of Man (Psalms of Solomon 17:4).<sup>208</sup> Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, spoke of death and humiliation as the means of his triumph (John 12:23-24, 34). The coming of Jesus, his death, burial, and resurrection, *though foretold in Old Testament Scripture* (cf., 1 Cor. 15:3-4), had completely blown the conceptual categories which Judaism had come to accept as the truth. Consequently, Jesus is God’s ultimate mystery who was revealed (Hebrews 1:1-3). So, it is Christologically irresponsible not to accept the implications arising out of historical inquiry.

### **Jesus as the Mystery of God Incarnate**

Peter, as an eyewitness, flatly denies he followed any myth.<sup>209</sup> “We did not follow cleverly invented stories [*μύθοις* = myths] when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pt. 1:16). Paul forewarned Timothy that some would follow myths rather than the truth. “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine . . . they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths [*μύθους*]” (2 Tim. 4:3-5). Moreover, Paul insisted that any notion of a fable that was not

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<sup>207</sup>Ibid., 189-190.

<sup>208</sup>Carson, *John*, 445.

<sup>209</sup>Though Hick may deny Petrine authorship, this passage, like 1 Jn. 1:1-4, claims that, whoever the author is, he was among eyewitnesses and writes authoritatively on that basis.

fact, even if the religious context were Judaism, was to be rejected (cf., Tit. 1:13-14; 1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7). Instead of claiming that Jesus is the “myth” of God incarnate, he claims that Jesus is God’s mystery (Col. 2:2).

Though Christ is identified with the mystery rather than with God in Colossians 2:2,<sup>210</sup> verse 3 says that Christ is God’s mystery because<sup>211</sup> “in him [= Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Since Paul just affirmed the supremacy of Christ in his creative activity (1:15-20), and he goes on to affirm Christ as the complete embodiment of the divine essence (2:9), the wisdom and knowledge here are most likely divine wisdom and knowledge. In other words, all that is deepest in God is mysteriously summed up in Christ. There were false teachers who were trying to deceive the Colossian believers by claiming they were a better source of esoteric wisdom and knowledge (cf., 2:4, 8, 16, 18). Paul counters, in effect, by saying that Christ is the ‘once-hidden-but-now-revealed-God’ –the divine secret made known by his bodily presence. True spiritual knowledge lies nowhere else but in Christ who is God’s wisdom (cf., 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:8).

A mystery is something hidden in the past, but revealed at a latter point (see, e.g., Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3-4, 6, 9; Col. 1:26). Markus Barth says that, “all Ephesian and Colossian verses that contain the noun *μυστήριον* convey the information that it is now ‘revealed,’ ‘known,’ ‘understood,’ and frankly ‘spoken out.’ In all cases a noetic or cognitive event is mentioned.” And, Barth goes on to say that Jesus Christ is “the essence and contents [*sic*] of the revealed secret (Col. 2:2).”<sup>212</sup>

Nevertheless, the most important passage pertaining to the explicit affirmation of the mystery of the incarnation is what Paul wrote to Timothy. What Paul said about Christ in Colossians 2:2 is spelled out more fully in 1 Timothy 3:16. He writes: “beyond all question, the

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<sup>210</sup>*Χριστοῦ* is in apposition to *τοῦ μυστηρίου* (objective genitive), not *τοῦ θεοῦ* (possessive genitive), so NRSV. Cf., Harris, *Jesus*, 265 and Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 81.

<sup>211</sup>More than likely, *ἐν* is causal in verse 3. Cf., Harris, *Jesus*, *ibid.*

<sup>212</sup>Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 125.

mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16). Though Paul’s primary concerns for Timothy are pastoral and ecclesiastical and he is not engaged in a strict christological polemic, this text does contain explicit incarnational language. Paul just finished saying that the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), then he gives Timothy a foundational truth for the church. The context of 1 Tim. 3:16, in conjunction with a series of “trustworthy sayings” Paul gives to Timothy (cf., 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11), makes it highly probable that 1 Tim. 3:16 is another brick in the church’s foundation and should be regarded as another ‘trustworthy saying.’

Murray Harris canvasses all the grammatical problems with reading 1 Tim. 3:16 as “God was manifest in the flesh” (so, KJV, NKJV) and concludes “1 Timothy 3:16 is not an instance of the christological use of *θεός*.”<sup>213</sup> Instead, it should read “He appeared in a body” (so NIV, NASB, NRSV, NEB). The problem is that there is no explicit antecedent of who or what is being referred to. Harris says “all the ancient versions presuppose the relative pronoun, whether *ὃς* or *ὅ* [masculine or neuter], and the earliest uncial [all capital letters] in the original hand that reads *θεός* . . . dates from the eighth or ninth century.”<sup>214</sup> Therefore, the better reading is with the relative masculine pronoun, “he.”

Nevertheless, reading 1 Tim. 3:16 this way is not without its grammatical problems. If the antecedent to the relative pronoun is *μυστήριον*, then there is the problem of concord. The gender of *ὃς* is masculine, whereas the gender of *μυστήριον* is neuter. That would make the reading “*he* appeared in a body” the more difficult reading. Hence, the propensity for scribal correction is greater. However, Harris points out that it is not uncommon for “*ὃς* to begin a christological hymn or affirmation (e.g., Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3) and, therefore, “the transition from *τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον* [the mystery of godliness is great] to *ὃς* [he]

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<sup>213</sup>Harris, *Jesus*, 268.

<sup>214</sup>*Ibid.*, 267.

becomes explicable.”<sup>215</sup> Hence, textual critics are virtually unanimous in reading  $\delta\varsigma$  as original.<sup>216</sup>

Though space will not allow an entire exposition of every line in this text, the first line pertains particularly to the subject of the incarnation. Paul implies the pre-existence of Jesus in 1 Tim. 1:15, and his human descent from David in 2 Tim. 2:8. This hymn (1 Tim. 3:16) is the combination of the heavenly and earthly origins of Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, humankind is not commonly spoken of as “appearing” or “manifesting in the flesh” (*ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί*), yet the New Testament says repeatedly that Jesus’ incarnate life was “revealed” (cf., Jn. 1:14, 31; Col. 2:9; Heb. 9:26; 1 Pt. 1:20; 1 Jn. 1:2; 3:5). It is without a doubt that Paul is here referring to something or someone which was revealed in the flesh. I. Howard Marshall concludes that,

although no subject is expressed (the AV ‘God was manifest’ follows a late text), the language is based on that used elsewhere to describe how the Son of God was incarnate. The thought is of an epiphany in human form, and the implication is that a divine or heavenly subject is intended. The reference is certainly to the earthly life of Jesus and not to his resurrection appearances.<sup>217</sup>

So, the mystery of God was made manifest in the flesh.

One final note regarding the early attestation of Jesus as God Incarnate. Murray Harris finds seven instances where  $\theta\epsilon\delta\varsigma$  is explicitly used of Jesus of Nazareth as a christological title (Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pt. 1:1). Hick alleges that this notion of believing Jesus was literally God incarnate is a late rendition. Hick’s own words bear clear witness:

We know of him [Jesus] only because others responded to him, with yet others responding to their responses, so that a movement developed which almost inevitably came to regard him as divine in the highly elastic sense in which outstanding religious and political figures were often so regarded in the ancient world. This ‘soft’ divinity, expressed in the ‘son of God’ metaphor, eventually developed into the ‘hard’ metaphysical claim that Jesus was God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity, incarnate.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>216</sup>Cf., Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 641.

<sup>217</sup>Marshall, *Jesus*, 173.

<sup>218</sup>Hick, *Metaphor*, 36.

Of course, this assumes that a certain amount of time must pass before the thinking of Jesus' disciples could mature enough to make such bold claims as 'Jesus is God Incarnate.' But, Harris points out that "it is not the passage of time in itself but dramatic events that effect any deepening or broadening of human thought."<sup>219</sup> As to the historical credibility of Jn. 20:28, a key passage affirming Jesus as God Incarnate, Harris demonstrates that there are references of time and place surrounding the pericope in which Thomas makes the claim, putting the Fourth Gospel in an historically verifiable setting (e.g., Jn. 20:19).<sup>220</sup> Harris says of this incident that, "as it stands, the pericope has so many signs of verisimilitude that its historicity may be confidently assumed, and since the confession in verse 28 is pivotal and climactic in the story it may be reckoned *ipsissima verba Thomae*."<sup>221</sup>

So, in dating these seven texts in which *θεός* is explicitly used of Jesus of Nazareth, Harris suggests the following chronological order: Jn. 20:28 (30 or 33 A.D.); Rom. 9:5 (ca. 57); Tit. 2:13 (ca. 63); 2 Pt. 1:1 (ca. 65); Heb. 1:8 (60s); Jn. 1:1; 18 (90s). If these dates are accurate, "the Christian use of *θεός* as a title for Jesus began immediately after the resurrection."<sup>222</sup> Though mystery may be involved, the reality of Jesus as God Incarnate was well established in the earliest Christian thought.

Hick's charges, then, that the deity of Jesus was a late development in the Christian Church can be dropped with good historical and grammatical reasons. There may have been some development in conceptualizing and formulating what originally came to pass in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Interpretation does occur *after* the interpreted. The amount of time, though, between Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, and the recording of those events, could not be sufficient to fabricate a myth or a legend. Even Hick's dating of the New Testament demonstrates this.

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<sup>219</sup>Harris, *Jesus*, 277.

<sup>220</sup>*Ibid.*, 113-119.

<sup>221</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>222</sup>*Ibid.*, 278.

Though there were various human interpretations of Jesus' person and works, what is recorded in the New Testament coincides with the substantive events and sayings of Jesus. If Jesus' actual words were not preserved, one can be reasonably sure that the 'gist' of Jesus' teachings was preserved and responsibly written down under divine inspiration. The result is that what the New Testament authors say when citing Jesus, Jesus himself says, and what Jesus himself says, God says.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The identity of Jesus of Nazareth is inextricably linked with the origin of the Christian faith. If Jesus was not fully God and fully human, then the Christian faith is in no way superior to any other of the world's religious traditions. This much Hick admits. The position concluded in this thesis is that Jesus is one person who possesses two natures, fully divine and fully human. It is on this basis alone that Christianity surpasses the other world religions in uniqueness and salvific effectiveness.

The price that all the world religions must pay in order to fit into the grid of John Hick's pluralism is too costly. They must give up their essential defining-beliefs, those which give the religions their distinct identity and characteristics. This sifting process that Hick seeks to put all the major religious traditions through is not simply an adjustment or fine-tuning of each truth-claim, but a total transformation of the defining-beliefs. The end result would be a mutated mosaic of religions where all distinctives are lost in the pluralistic amalgam.

Lopping off the truth-claims of each religious tradition so they come into epistemic parity with Hick's Real *an sich* results in, not just a truncated version of that tradition, but a total reconstitution of a given tradition's fundamental tenets. This thesis has defended biblical Christianity as the truth because the identity of Jesus of Nazareth as both fully God and fully human is *the* essential defining-belief. This will not change, despite the best efforts of John Hick, or anyone else. His pluralistic hypothesis may be attractive in theory, however, the world in which we live is not a classroom. People have to live out what they believe to be true. The writers of Scripture and their spiritual sons and daughters were dying for what they believed to be the truth about Jesus' person and work. To give up the essential defining belief of

Christianity would mean they died in vain; not to mention the fact that the Christian faith would be a complete deception.

The exclusive claims of Jesus, Scripture, and historical Christianity will not go away simply because John Hick does not agree with them or does not see how they can be held in light of his theory of religious pluralism. The primary issue of Christianity is the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. As the complete and final revelation of God in human form, Jesus of Nazareth is the founder of the Christian faith and, on this basis alone, Christianity is unique. However, it is not only unique, but uniquely superior to all the other world religions. This is because Jesus of Nazareth, the source of the Christian faith, is metaphysically and salvifically superior to all other religious figures (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; Col. 2:9; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:1-3).

Moreover, simply because there are a plethora of religious options in the world today does not necessarily obliterate the notion of truth in religion. Where contradiction exists, truth cannot. And the world's religious traditions contain essential defining truth-claims that undeniably contradict one another. Particularly at the metaphysical level, the claims of some traditions are the exact opposite of others (e.g., Islam and Theravada Buddhism). This being so, it is epistemically impossible for John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis to follow from the mere fact of the plurality of religions.

I have argued that the doctrine of Jesus' person is adequately summarized by the Chalcedonian formula. Although not inspired, it provides a conceptual basis from which one can look at the relevant biblical data and see if Jesus of Nazareth was indeed one person with two natures. It is true that Chalcedon does not answer all the questions it may give rise to. After all, it is simply a summary document stating what the Church believed. However, the conceptual framework of Chalcedon is useful to provoke a degree of insight into the person of Jesus. Chalcedon has provided the Christian Church with an orthodox position on the person of Christ for almost fifteen centuries. Hick's call to do away with Chalcedon based upon the great evils he believes it has caused is historically irresponsible and theologically naive.

In Chapter one I set out to describe *what* Hick believes regarding the incarnation of Jesus. From myth to metaphor, Hick has sought to keep Jesus in the picture of Christianity by making him out to be a symbol of a divine incarnation. What the symbol is representing is God's love for humankind. Since Hick has deemed a literal incarnation of God as incoherent, Jesus of Nazareth metaphorically incarnated God's love. The value of the metaphor is in its ability to orient persons toward Hick's Real *an sich*, the religious Ultimate. Giving priority to religious experience over reason, Hick says that in so far as one's experience of Jesus is producing positive expressions of love and compassion, then this is the extent to which one finds the metaphor of Jesus as God incarnate meaningful and soteriologically effective.

I pointed out various problems with defining metaphysical claims with phenomenological expressions. Moreover, I stated that the notion of metaphor implicitly carries with it a substance behind the myth/metaphor which corresponds to an objective reality. That is, in every analogy there is a univocal core of truth which the analogy signifies. The signifier of Hick's metaphor is the Real *an sich*, which, upon closer inspection, is less coherent than the classical doctrine of Jesus being one person with two natures. Hick's metaphysical correlate behind the myth/metaphor ends up being not only incomprehensible, but non-representable.

The historical grounds of Hick's Christology is not based in an inspired text, yet Hick believes many things about the historical Jesus of Nazareth. He dismisses the New Testament documentation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as merely human accounts imperfectly looking back in time and interpreting Jesus' teachings in light of an evolving Christology which Jesus himself would have denied. By affirming that Jesus was different only in degree and not in kind and that a literal incarnation of God is incoherent, Hick believes he has escaped questions of truth. And, since the New Testament is merely taking historical events and interpreting them religiously from a human point of view, it cannot be an accurate portrayal of what Jesus thought about himself. The final product that Hick ends up with is a Jesus who is not any more qualified to be followed than any of the other religious figures throughout the centuries. Yet, by

employing the concept of metaphor in the way he does, Hick leaves himself open to challenges of what constitutes the metaphysic behind his metaphor.

In Chapter two I demonstrated *why* John Hick believes that Jesus is not literally God Incarnate. Since Hick is committed to a universalism where everyone, without distinction and exception, is going to obtain an eternal state of bliss, then it is not necessary for any one religion to be soteriologically superior. So, it would appear that Hick's eschatological hopes are driving his soteriology. That is, in order for his pluralism to work, Hick must believe that of the world's major religious traditions all are soteriologically effective. Jesus may have died, but his death was a "penultimate" matter. The significance comes in how Jesus' life inclines one toward the Real *an sich*. Hick assumes that all the world's great religious traditions are soteriologically effective *because* everyone is seeking the same religious Ultimate. Moreover, because of the substantial similarity between all the world's religions, at least on the phenomenological level, they must all be reaching for the same eschatological goal.

I pointed out that regardless of the similarities, it is a far distance to travel in order to make the world's religious traditions the same. Similarity and sameness are not identical. And even sameness on general revelation does not mean sameness of salvation. It could be that all the religious traditions are headed in the wrong direction, or that one is still soteriologically effective despite its similarities to other traditions. Moreover, without some objective vantage point from which to evaluate soteriological claims, it is impossible to say exactly what the religions are doing salvifically.

Hell is a morally offensive notion for Hick and he seeks to dismiss it on theological and philosophical grounds. Yet, he never adequately answers the question of what exactly is wrong with a loving, gracious, just, and holy God assigning some persons to hell because they persistently reject his truth and love. When the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity is factored into the equation, hell becomes a more plausible notion.

Real differences exist between the world's religions regarding the human predicament and salvation. Though all could be wrong, all cannot be correct. Without some revelatory claim from

which an evaluation is done and a determination is made, it is impossible to know which religious tradition is soteriologically effective. Hick does not and cannot, given his pluralistic hypothesis, claim any special revelatory stance. Moreover, without some authoritative revelation from God, Hick cannot legitimately exclude any particular religious tradition.

Chapter three was an explanation of *how* Hick holds to his pluralistic hypothesis. Employing a pseudo-Kantian schema for his religious epistemology, Hick begins with the phenomenological expressions of the world's traditions and seeks to explain them based upon perceived similarities. As the noumenon, the religious Ultimate is never directly encountered. The Real *an sich* is simply an inference, based upon the historically and culturally conditioned categories of human experience. As a result, one's god is determined by one's geographic location. The only continuity between the Real *an sich* and the various human responses is found in the practical orientation toward a salvation/liberation/enlightenment. However, it was pointed out that this is confusing the utility of a religion with its truthfulness.

Hick denies the propositional nature of religious truth. All religious truth is culturally conditioned. Assertions made by religions are theory-laden and cannot speak of ultimate or objective truth. He assumes that because theological propositions are made by humans, and humans err, therefore, theological propositions made by humans are in error. However, I stated that this is a false dichotomy. It is possible that theological propositions could be both human and infallible, given divine inspiration. While it is true that humans err, it is not true that humans err *all the time*.

Hick irresponsibly emphasizes the interpretations of various world religions at the expense of dealing with the genuine conflicting assertions made by the world religions. Religious truth for John Hick is a subjective response to the Real, rather than an objective proposition to be confirmed or disconfirmed. Hick locates the property of truth within persons and their responses, rather than within the proposition itself. Though he denies the import of historical claims, he makes historical information person-relative, instead of relative to an actual state of affairs. But, truth is a feature of propositions, not persons.

I also stated that there is a triad which exists in every religious experience: the *perceiver*, the *perceived*, and the *perception*. I argued that the perceiver experiences the perceived directly, though not comprehensively. However, all experiences are interpreted, but this does not preclude the possibility for knowing the truth or identifying a false religious claim. Though religious experiences are filtered through the gridwork of one's prior beliefs, it does not necessarily entail the religious pluralism of John Hick.

Apart from some revelatory position, and given the philosophical problems stressed, it is impossible for Hick to know whether his religious pluralism is correct. His epistemology excludes anyone, including himself, from being in a position to have objective propositional knowledge about God or Jesus. In the end, Hick's religious epistemology becomes a kind of conceptual relativism where no one can know anything for sure. Even if one could know a religious claim to be true, there would be no way of discriminating among the different conceptions of the Real.

In Chapter four, I defended the Chalcedonian Confession that Jesus is one person with two natures, fully divine and fully human. I illustrated that the divine nature and the human nature are not essentially incompatible. Given the limitation features common, but not necessary, to all humans, it is impossible for a human to unite with the divine. However, if those limitation features (esp., sinfulness) are not present, then it is logically possible for God the Son to unite with a human nature without surrendering any of the attributes essential to deity.

In order for Jesus of Nazareth to be God the Son, he must contiguously share in a fully human nature and a fully divine nature. By saying that some of his attributes were divine, and some were human the charge of incoherence and contradiction is avoided. Several categories were broached, as a means of explicating the Christological claims of Chalcedon. By distinguishing between an *individual*-nature and a *kind*-nature, it is possible to show how Jesus of Nazareth was like all other humans and how he was different from all other humans. Jesus' *individual*-nature was not shared by anyone else, whereas his *kind*-nature is shared by all other humans.

The difference between *essential* and *non-essential* properties made it possible to demonstrate further the distinctions involved in being the kind of divine person Jesus is and the kind of persons all other humans are. Furthermore, the categories of *common* versus *essential* properties of individuals was introduced as a means of showing the possibility of Jesus' impeccability. Finally, how it is that Jesus was *fully* human without being *merely* human shed considerable light upon the limitation properties that are common to all but Jesus of Nazareth and aided the response to the claim that Jesus could have sinned.

I insisted that the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth was a unique and mysterious event. The divine nature was the over-arching principle of life in Jesus. His human nature, mind included, subsisted within the canopy of the divine nature and mind. My research indicated that Jesus is an ontologically complex being who is a divine person who took on a human nature, not a divine nature who assumed a human person. The relationship between nature and person was briefly addressed when I suggested that the latter is the ontological basis for the former.

Hick's charge that the divine and human natures are incompatible does not withstand these categories which provide an adequate means of understanding both anthropology and theology. Jesus was and is the one unique and integrated person who has both a divine and human nature. Charges that the orthodox doctrine of Christ is incoherent can be dropped, given these categories for understanding both God and humankind.

Finally, in chapter four I defended the Christology of Chalcedon against anachronism or over-contextualization. Though philosophical notions were present in the Confession, this does not require an inaccurate understanding of the biblical texts by the framers of Chalcedon. I showed how uniting the divine nature with the human nature was an aversion to the Greek mind in the fifth century when Chalcedon was penned. Yet, the authors of Chalcedon were convinced that the New Testament writers and Jesus himself clearly taught that he was a divine person who possessed a fully human nature. Hick's charge that Chalcedon has no assignable

meaning and that it should be thrown out of the Christian Church is a clear indication that his theological intent is a *discriminating* pluralism.

Chapter five, was a biblical defense for Jesus of Nazareth as the Mystery of God Incarnate. First, I discussed Hick's views on history and the Bible, showing that he discredits most of what is said about Jesus or what Jesus says about himself. Hick's dating of the New Testament is surprisingly early, along conservative lines, and I showed from this that Hick could not rightly claim an evolving, developing Christology in the early Church. As eyewitnesses of Jesus, many of his biographers were reliable witnesses to his life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

I demonstrated by the criterion of dissimilarity that the sayings of Jesus could not be created by Jesus' biographers, because they assume more fluidity in the oral tradition than actually existed. The actual words of Jesus, in some cases, were preserved, while the actual intent of Jesus' teachings was, in other cases, sufficiently retained so as to communicate the 'gist' of what he thought and taught.

Considerable space was devoted to Matt. 11:27 where Jesus claims to have a unique relationship with God the Father and a unique and reciprocal knowledge of God the Father. In effect, Jesus claims that all who seek to know the Father can do so only as he allows. As God the Son, Jesus has the exclusive right to reveal or conceal God the Father. More than likely, this passage is a "Q" saying and is original from the lips of Jesus. It is not found in Mark, but is found in Matthew and Luke. Thus, both Matthew and Luke had a high Christology early on.

Given Hick's early dating of the New Testament, I showed how some of the earliest books (Galatians, 1 Thessalonians) ascribed to Jesus the title "Lord." Hick claims that Jesus never thought of himself as equal with God. Yet, Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin intimates him making an unmistakable claim to deity. As eschatological Son of Man, Jesus implicit prediction of his resurrection and distinct prediction of his return from heaven was clearly understood as a claim to deity.

Finally, in chapter five, I demonstrated that Jesus is the mystery of God Incarnate. Peter's insistence upon following a literal person and not a myth, combined with every other New Testament instance where myth is used perjoratively, illustrates that Hick's notion of Jesus as the myth of God incarnate is contrary to biblical testimony. Moreover, mystery, in biblical terms, is something hidden in the past but revealed at some point in the future. Mystery pertains to literal facts, persons, etc., whereas myth is a non-literal claim that does not correspond to any objective state of affairs. The Apostle Paul, for example, says in effect that Jesus is the 'once-hidden-but-now-revealed-God' (Col. 2:2).

In 1 Tim. 3:16 explicit incarnational language is used. It is counted as one of the pillars of truth which the Church was to depend on as a "trustworthy saying." Paul affirms in 1 Tim. 1:15 Jesus' pre-existence, and in 2 Tim. 2:8 Paul declares Jesus' human descent from David. In 1 Tim. 3:16 the entire Christological position comes to Paul via an early Christian hymn that affirms both his deity and humanity. Lastly, following Murray Harris, I cited seven texts that expressly attribute deity to Jesus of Nazareth. Hick's charge that sufficient time must have elapsed in order for a high Christology to have developed will not withstand the historical or biblical data.

In the final analysis, the Bible does not suggest that Jesus of Nazareth was anything other than literally God manifest in the flesh. Hick's *ad hoc* approach to Christology does not do justice to the text of Scripture, nor can it account for the countless lives that have been changed and continue to be changed by God the Son. Challenges to orthodox Christology ought to be taken seriously. Each objection John Hick levels against Christian orthodoxy represents years of reflection and scholarly activity. Every concern he has raised regarding the person and work of Jesus deserves a response.

The charge against the orthodox position of the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth—that he was not literally God in the flesh—cannot withstand the tests of reason, experience, Scripture, and historical testimony, all of which unequivocally demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth is literally one divine person who possesses a human nature. Though not fully comprehensible, the

Christian Church can continue to affirm the biblical testimony, summarized by the Chalcedon Confession, that Jesus of Nazareth is literally the Mystery of God Incarnate.

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