

THE DISINTEGRATION OF JOHN HICK'S CHRISTOLOGY

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John Hick is one of the leading philosophers of religion of our time. His impact has not been limited to philosophy, however. He is also active in contemporary theology, especially in reformulating the Christian tradition and in redirecting the Christian attitude toward other world religions. The determining factor in this has been Hick's Christology, a Christology that has changed tremendously over the course of his forty-year academic career. Hick's early works show him as a Christian philosopher of religion. Since 1970, however, he has been a philosopher of religion who merely happens to call himself a Christian, one who sees himself standing in the line of Schleiermacher, Strauss and Harnack.¹

Today Hick is among the most liberal, if not radical, of Christian thinkers, and by his own account heterodox in his theology. But this same John Hick began his life as part of an InterVarsity group. As he tells it, he was raised in a nominally Anglican family. Along the way, however, he read some theosophy but rejected it as too cut and dried. While studying law he was converted to an evangelical and Reformed faith. Although Hick says he long retained the essentials of his early orthodoxy, he soon parted ways with InterVarsity because he believed it was closed to awkward questions and free inquiry. He says such a move from evangelicalism requires no change in one's response to Jesus Christ, only a change in the body of theology associated with that response.²

In World War II Hick, a conscientious objector, served with a medical unit. He used this time to prepare a set of notes that would later become his first book.³ Although orthodox in its theology, the book presupposed a Kantian epistemology that would increasingly dominate Hick's theology. At this early date Hick could hold together a theology and philosophy that were fundamentally incompatible. Later, his experience would make that impossible. His theology was neo-orthodox and included doubts about the virgin birth of Christ and the divine origin of the Bible. He also understood religion as a human response to the divine, believed in universal salvation, and understood religious language to be expressed in terms of myth.

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¹ J. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 18.

² J. Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1980)

3. In the first chapter of his book, Hick describes his spiritual pilgrimage through 1980.

³ J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge: A Modern Introduction to the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1957).

In *Faith and Knowledge* Hick accepted the conclusions of the historic creeds about Jesus Christ, but he was less clear about how humans can come to the knowledge the creeds affirm. He said further examination and different expressions of Christology are possible, but they will not be ultimately incompatible with traditional Christian teaching. He considered the attribution of deity to Jesus to be the logical consequence of his words and deeds, and said this occurred within twenty years of Jesus' death.

Before examining Hick's Christology we need to look at his epistemology, because it becomes increasingly evident that this controls his entire theology. As a graduate student, Hick had been greatly influenced by N. K. Smith's idealism and J. Oman's emphasis on religious experience.⁴ As Hick explains it, all our knowledge is "experiencing-as."⁵ This derives from the Kantian distinction between the thing in itself (noumenon) and the thing as we experience it (phenomenon). So all our knowledge is of things as we experience them, not as they are in themselves, because we can know nothing directly. Thus our knowledge is inevitably less and other than reality is in itself. For religion this means we only experience divine reality from a finite and imperfect human perspective.

This epistemology did not significantly influence Hick's theology (especially his Christology) until a change of jobs put him in contact with world religions in a practical rather than an academic sense. This contact was the catalyst that has reshaped his theology to be consistent with his epistemology. At that point he decided Christianity was but one of the possible human perspectives and enjoyed no preferred position among those perspectives. This relativism meant that for a Christian to experience salvation through Jesus in no way falsified other religious experiences. Jesus' life was one point at which God has acted in relation to humans. While it is the only point that concerns Christians we may not, says Hick, conclude it is the only point where God has ever acted.⁶ Furthermore we cannot know anything about the Real (Hick's name for God) except that it is beyond knowing.⁷ Interestingly, however, Hick is able to tell us a great deal about this ineffable Real.

After 1968 Hick began to apply his Kantian epistemology to the doctrine of God. This way he could relativize the person and work of Christ as he sought for a way to reject the salvific claims of Christianity without giving up his claim to be a Christian. If the God of Jesus Christ is no more

⁴ G. D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987) 6. N. K. Smith is the translator of the standard English-language edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Even in his more orthodox days Hick emphasized religious experience as the criterion of belief instead of logical arguments or historical evidence.

⁵ *Ibid. passim*; J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988) 37–52. The latter is a 1969 article, written soon after Hick's close contact with world religions. It heralded what he called the "reconstruction of Christian belief."

⁶ J. Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 181. Hick at this point overstates the traditional Christian position, which has never said God has revealed himself only in Jesus Christ.

⁷ Hick, *Metaphor* 142–143.

than a human perception of the divine, then the Christian God is only an intermediary between the individual and the Real. Jesus is no longer decisive because each of the various divine *personae* offers its own way of salvation.

G. D'Costa has identified three key factors in Hick's theological development. Hick has sought to take seriously modern developments in theology, science and the social sciences. The result of this has been an attempt to construct a credible and rationally viable theology. Finally, Hick's approach has been primarily philosophical, not theological. As a result he has made little use of Christian tradition, ecclesiology or Biblical theology.⁸

Throughout his career Hick's understanding of the nature of Scripture has been controlled by his epistemology, but this was not evident because that was the typical neo-orthodox understanding of Scripture. Only after Hick moved to the multicultural environment of Birmingham, England, did this epistemology take overt control of his Christology. From my reading of Hick's work I believe that while his Christology was initially reasonably orthodox, the spirit underlying it was not. Hick has always grounded his theology in human experience. He has never considered God's revelation to be propositional. This means that when he came upon non-Christian forms of religious experience—forms in many ways similar to Christian experience—he had no basis for deciding between them because he had downplayed the incompatible propositional elements in the religions.

In 1958 Hick wrote a sharply critical evaluation of D. M. Baillie's *God Was in Christ*.⁹ He said that while Baillie sought to remain orthodox, he tended to understate Christ's deity. Hick accused Baillie of teaching a degree Christology and adoptionist Christology. He paraphrased Baillie as saying, "The union of the human and divine, which occurs in other men's lives only intermittently and imperfectly, was manifested in the life of Jesus completely and continuously. What in other men is inspiration amounted in Christ to Incarnation."¹⁰ Hick emphasized that Jesus is different in kind, not merely in degree, from other humans.

He was divine in the sense in which God is divine. He was not, therefore, more divine than other men, not even infinitely more divine than they; for in the sense in which he was divine other men are not divine at all.¹¹

Soon after this, Hick left Cornell University to accept a position at Princeton Theological Seminary. He decided to transfer his ministerial credentials from an English presbytery to the presbytery in which Princeton is located. When some ministers objected that Hick refused to affirm the virgin birth of Christ, the dispute required over a year to be settled and went

⁸ Ibid. 6–7. Hick has joined that long line of thinkers who by seeking to take seriously the intellectual environment they lived in ended up being coopted by that environment. One of these, a man with whom Hick now clearly identifies himself, was F. Schleiermacher.

⁹ J. Hick, "The Christology of D. M. Baillie," *SJT* 11 (1958) 1–12.

¹⁰ Ibid. 6.

¹¹ Ibid. 2.

to the denomination's general assembly, which decided in Hick's favor.¹² Reviews Hick wrote in the late 1950s and early 1960s also contain hints of his later direction, albeit in seminal form.

In 1966 Hick contributed what some have called his last statement of orthodox Christianity to a *Festschrift* for H. H. Farmer.¹³ It is actually the first statement of his departure from that orthodoxy. He wrote that Christ's uniqueness is at the heart of Christology, but this claim to uniqueness needs to be reconsidered. While affirming the intent of the early Church's creeds, Hick rejected the substance language they were written in. Instead of saying Jesus Christ is of the same nature as God, Hick suggested saying that the love Jesus exhibited in his life is the same love that God shows toward us, even though he recognized that *homoagapē* is no more self-explanatory than *homoousios* and that it actually says less than *homoousios*. In suggesting this, Hick was reflecting the simplistic conclusion that Greek thought was static while Hebrew thought was dynamic. Thus substance language is both un-Biblical and incomprehensible in the modern world. It needs to be replaced by action language more compatible with both the Bible and modern thought.¹⁴ Hick suggested the time has come to reconsider some form of degree or neo-Arian Christology, with its strong affirmation of Jesus' real humanity.

Hick also introduced the "Copernican revolution" in theology that would become central to his theological program, reemphasized that human experience was the basis for his theology, and suggested Farmer's "inhumanization" be substituted for the traditional "incarnation."¹⁵ Already in this article Hick described Christ's preexistence, incarnation, virgin birth, and ascension as mythological and asked whether they are essential to classical Christology or culturally-conditioned accretions.¹⁶ Hick denied that Jesus made any of these claims about himself. Rather, the Church made them in Christ's behalf based on the "logic of the worship that he had evoked by his redeeming influence on human life."¹⁷ Hick's Christology at this point had become monophysite, but that one nature was a human nature.

Nonetheless he concluded his contribution by saying that Christology "must proclaim what it cannot satisfactorily explain" because it is an action that has been initiated from beyond this world, and all we can do is observe and respond and rejoice but never really understand.¹⁸ Hick continued to

¹² See "Assembly Will Rule in New Jersey Case," *Presbyterian Life* 15 (April 15, 1962) 30–31. The General Assembly decided on the basis of presbyterian polity, not theology, that it is the prerogative of individual presbyteries to decide their membership.

¹³ J. Hick, "Christology at the Cross Roads," *Prospect for Theology: Essays in Honour of H. H. Farmer* (ed. F. G. Healey; Digswell Place: James Nisbit, 1966) 137–166.

¹⁴ Although Hick is critical of substance language, he still appreciates the need for its use at Nicea and accepts the identity between Jesus and God it attempts to express. He even says some might think it a valid conclusion from the logic of the gospel accounts.

¹⁵ Hick, "Cross Roads" 153–154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 165.

affirm that a high Christology had characterized Christianity from such an early date that strong reasons are required to replace it, and the burden of proof must lie with the innovators. The task of the traditionist is to present creedal Christology in a way that can be understood today.¹⁹

Hick presented his *agapē* Christology as an orthodox alternative to traditional substance Christology. It actually appears to be a broadly adoptionist or degree Christology not significantly different from the Christology he condemned in D. M. Baillie eight years earlier. It is true that Jesus lives out God's love to humanity, but is that not precisely what the NT says all Christians ought to do? So Jesus does perfectly what we do imperfectly. Hick is trying to state Nicene Christology in functional language, but his rejection of ontological language means he fails to bring Jesus together with God in the same way all functional Christologies have ultimately failed to do.

The next year Hick accepted the chair in philosophical teaching at the University of Birmingham. This would constitute the visible turning point in his theology, although it actually was the occasion that made Hick bring his theology into conformity with his epistemology. He describes Birmingham as the most multicultural of England's cities. Here he says he realized that

although the language and the liturgical actions and the cultural ethos differ greatly in each case, yet from a religious point of view basically the same thing is going on. . . . It therefore seems evident that this one God is somehow being encountered in different ways within these different traditions.²⁰

With this conclusion Hick was forced to reevaluate his Christology completely. He continued to describe Christ as the decisive revelation of God and described the fall, Christ's salvific work and the resurrection in mythological terms. He rejected the possibility of divine judgment.

Hick has long been concerned with the problem of evil.²¹ He rejects the traditional Christian understanding that he traces through Augustine and that emphasizes the fall of humans from grace and our alienation from God. He prefers what he calls the Irenaean understanding in which evil was an original part of creation and where humans are victims of that evil, victims who will be liberated in the consummation of God's purpose. This understanding presumes a universal salvation. Behind this universal salvation Hick sees a God of love. This has led many of Hick's critics to complain that he is surreptitiously retaining the Christian understanding of God that he says must be transcended. Christians believe God is a God of love because that is what Jesus revealed him to be.

Hick has always minimized the seriousness of human sin and its character as rebellion against a holy God. When combined with his epistemological openness to world religions, this underestimation of the seriousness

¹⁹ Ibid. 147–148.

²⁰ J. Hick, "A Personal Note," *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1993) 141.

²¹ See J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (2d ed.; New York: Harper, 1966).

of sin helped open the way for a radical reevaluation of Christ's person and work. The effect of this on Hick's Christology is a reminder of the importance of one's theological anthropology and of the interrelation of Christian doctrines. Hick's Christology changed not because he reevaluated it and found it wanting but because he changed his stance in other areas and these changes forced a change in Christology if he wished to remain consistent.

Hick designated his new perspective a "Copernican revolution." Interestingly, whereas the original Copernican revolution in astronomy removed the experiencing subject from the center of the universe, Hick's religious "Copernican revolution" places the experiencing self at the center of the universe. As Hick understands it, however, his religion is no longer Christocentric but has become theocentric: God is at the center and all human religions, including Christianity, "serve and revolve around him."²² Yet this theocentric center remains remarkably like the Christian God.²³ Hick justifies his revolution by a doctrine he has long believed: the universal salvific will of God. He had seen men and women who disbelieved the Christian claims about Jesus but still lived moral lives, and he could not accept that such people might be unacceptable to God. Hick often expresses this objection as rejection of the dogma that there is no salvation outside the Church, but in reality he rejects the doctrine that salvation is through Christ alone. For John Hick, Jesus is but one way—the Christian way—by which humans experience salvation. By 1970 Hick had decided most of the key Christian teachings were untenable or open to doubt. These included divine revelation, *creatio ex nihilo*, the fall of humanity, Jesus' virgin birth, miracles, substitutionary death and bodily resurrection, Jesus as the only way to salvation, final judgment, and heaven and hell as the only human ends.²⁴

Another area that has been important to Hick is religious language. Early in his career he was willing to describe such language as mythic, but without the consequences he later would draw from that description. In 1961 he described the central Christian affirmations as factual, whereas the language used to express the believer's awareness of the Christian mystery is myth, symbol and poetry. He added: "It is possible to see large tracts of Christian discourse as significant although non-factual if one holds them within a context of genuinely factual beliefs."²⁵

²² J. Hick, "Learning from Other Faiths: IX. The Christian View of Other Faiths," *ExpTim* 84 (November 1972) 38.

²³ G. D'Costa says Hick's understanding of God as all-loving remains grounded in Jesus' revelation about God, and this means the ontological link between Jesus and God remains intact. He says further that "the God of universal love at the centre cannot be spoken of or recognized without Jesus, an implication which Hick explicitly and unjustifiably rejects when propounding his theology of religions" (*Theology and Religious Pluralism: the Challenge of Other Religions* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986] 32–33).

²⁴ J. Hick, "The Reconstruction of Christian Belief for Today and Tomorrow: 1," *Theology* 73 (1970) 339.

²⁵ Hick, *God and the Universe* 22 ff. He went on to say that if the entire range of religious belief were nonfactual, then none of it could express the sort of significance that depends on a relationship to objective reality.

Even at this early date Hick understood myth in a nonfactual sense. But he considered such key Christian doctrines as the incarnation and resurrection to be factual. It was other doctrines, ones he thought secondary to and explanatory of the key doctrines, that he called mythical (e.g. the virgin birth). As his epistemology took greater control of his theology he came increasingly to see key Christian doctrines, especially those concerning Christ, as mythical. It might be said that viewing these doctrines as mythical or metaphorical instead of literal was the easy way out for Hick. The new perspective derived from contact with the world religions required a major change in his theology, but outright rejection would mean he was no longer a Christian—and for some reason, Hick wants very much to retain his Christian identification although he rejects all Christian distinctives.

Hick chose instead to have his cake and eat it too. He retained the form of the doctrines while explaining that their true meaning was found in his reformulation. All this was necessary because, as Hick recognizes, if Jesus really is as the NT and the creeds describe him, then Christianity is superior to all other religions and Christian exclusivists are correct. Hick deems this an unacceptable conclusion.²⁶ He also questioned whether Christian beliefs are essential or result from prescientific interpretation. His tone indicates he believes the latter and so is free to leave behind the mythical concepts of historical Christianity as religion “advances into the new cultural world of modern science.”²⁷

This attitude would burst on the world in the notorious *The Myth of God Incarnate*.²⁸ In this book Hick and his colleagues argued that the incarnation is a myth—not in the technical language of religion, but in the sense of not being literally true. Myth intends to create an attitude, not teach literal truth. For Hick the facticity of the incarnation became a problem only when he was confronted with the claims of the world religions.²⁹

Hick describes the idea of incarnation as a basic metaphor. “When someone embodies some ideal or idea or value three-dimensionally in his life, we can say, in a self-explanatory metaphor, that this ideal is being incarnated in that life.”³⁰ Hick applies this to Jesus as the one in whom the highest degree of divine love has been manifested. In saying this he does not see himself as denying the real importance of Jesus but affirming it. Christianity

²⁶ Hick has made this comment in many of his books and articles over the past twenty years, but it is stated clearly in *Metaphor* ix, 154, 162. See also his contribution in *Myth* 179–180; *God Has Many Names* 6.

²⁷ J. Hick, *The Center of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1978) 9. This introduction to Christianity is the first revision of *Christianity at the Centre* (1968), which presented a relatively orthodox Christianity. In 1983 Hick rewrote the book as *The Second Christianity*, suggesting that two sorts of Christianity now exist: the traditional creedal form and the modern pluralistic form. He advocates the latter as the only kind of Christianity intellectually respectable and practically workable in the modern age.

²⁸ Cf. n. 6 *supra*.

²⁹ J. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985) 11.

³⁰ J. Hick, *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (ed. M. Goulder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 83–84.

went wrong, he says, when it mistook the devotional language of early Christians for literal description. This is evident in that theologians have been unable to unpack the meaning of incarnation.

It seems impossible to take the thought of God-Man beyond the phrase "God-Man" and to find any definitive meaning or content in it. . . . The lesson of those early attempts to understand the Incarnation, each of which misrepresented it by trying to spell it out in an intelligible hypothesis, is surely that the Incarnation is not a theological theory but a religious myth.³¹

Thus there is nothing that can be called the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.³²

To understand the incarnation as myth means it is not an ontological claim about Jesus but a metaphorical statement about the significance of this life through which God was acting on earth.³³ Hick says that the question is whether the doctrine of the incarnation has any nonmetaphorical meaning.

That Jesus was God the Son incarnate is not literally true, since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application to Jesus of a mythical concept whose function is analogous to that of the notion of a divine sonship ascribed in the ancient world to a king.³⁴

He goes on to say that this honorific language expresses the believer's attitude toward Jesus. It expresses what Jesus has done, not who he is. Hick seems to think that only in this century have Christians given serious thought to the nature of the language used by the earliest Christians to describe Jesus. Thus for centuries we have failed to understand that the early devotional language was metaphorical, poetic, symbolic and mythological while the later creedal language was literal.

Hick objects that Jesus never taught he was God the Son, and he believes this is sufficient to call all later Christological development into question. He suggests that Jesus probably considered himself the final prophet before the end times. He may even have called himself Son of Man and Messiah. He was intensely conscious of God and dedicated himself to proclaiming the coming kingdom, but he never understood himself in terms of incarnation, divine sonship, or a Trinity. Hick goes so far as to say that not even Jesus' first disciples thought of him as God incarnate.³⁵ Hick's Jesus went around doing good and pointing people to the coming kingdom. The Lord's prayer, the parables, and Jesus' moral teaching form the heart of Hick's NT and of the message of Jesus himself.

Today Hick says the only proper Christology is a degree Christology that goes well beyond the degree Christology he condemned in his 1958

³¹ Hick, *God and the Universe* 170.

³² Hick, *Incarnation and Myth* 47–48.

³³ Hick, *Metaphor* 105–106.

³⁴ Hick, *Myth* 178–179.

³⁵ Hick, *God and the Universe* 114, 145; *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. Hick and P. F. Knitter; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) 31; *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1993) 49.

critique of Baillie. Hick's Jesus was a man remarkably open to God, with an intense God-consciousness, able to declare God's word and serving as a channel for the divine power: "He was so powerfully God-conscious that his life vibrated, as it were, to the divine life."³⁶ Jesus is the one who has made God real to us and opened our hearts to God's claim on us. None of this requires that we make any ontological claims about Jesus. If incarnation means the coexistence of divine and human natures in one person (assuming this is even possible), says Hick, then to the extent anyone is Christ-like God is incarnate in that person. Thus incarnation is not a unique event. What is the problem with a unique incarnation? Simply that it leads to a Christian exclusivism regarding salvation. For some reason Hick thinks the problem of how to relate Christianity to other religions is a relatively new one.

To Hick, an added benefit of degree Christology is that it makes Jesus more like other religious founders: The activity of God in Jesus is the same kind of activity of God in Moses, Gautama, or Muhammad. Jesus can still be the supreme instance of God's activity, but now this must be determined by historical investigation, not proclaimed *a priori*. The problem is that Hick considers the historical data too fragmentary for such a comparison ever to be meaningful. In fact even the historical data regarding Jesus are fragmentary and ambiguous. Behind the portraits painted by various communities lies a largely unknown Jesus. The focus of Hick's historical agnosticism appears to be Jesus' death and resurrection. He moves beyond the historical facts to the theological interpretation to the rejection of substitutionary atonement and bodily resurrection. The value of Jesus' death lies in its nature as martyrdom.

Hick surmises that if Christianity had moved eastward toward India and China instead of westward into Europe and North Africa, Jesus probably would have been identified as Bodhisattva, not the divine *Logos* or Son. Tradition tells us that Christianity did quickly spread eastward, but a survey of Christianity in that area of the world shows a firm commitment to the same understanding of Jesus found in the Greco-Roman world.

If Christian claims about Jesus are not literally true, then Christian teaching about salvation is without basis. If Jesus differs only in degree, not in kind, from other religious teachers, then the religions of these teachers are no less salvific. Salvation is a gradual process (longer than an earthly lifetime) in which people fulfill the God-given potentialities of their nature.

The great world traditions are fundamentally alike in exhibiting a soteriological structure. . . . Each begins by declaring that our ordinary human life is profoundly lacking and distorted. . . . Thus they are all concerned to bring about the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.³⁷

Hick also offers a moral argument against creedal Christology. He says that what began as an innocent and even appropriate affirmation of the

³⁶ Hick, *Myth* 172; *The Center of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1978) 27.

³⁷ J. Hick, *The Second Christianity* (London: SCM, 1983) 86.

authenticity and adequacy of belief in Jesus as the Christ has become a source of persecution, oppression and exploitation. This leads him to ask if traditional beliefs about Jesus are really essential to Christianity and if the time has not come to rethink all the doctrines that cluster around Jesus: soteriology, Christology, the Trinity. Hick's argument is in the form of a question that asks if a teaching that has so often been used to validate the practice of human evil—the deity of Christ—is essential to Christian faith, or even false.³⁸ His argument at this point does not hold because it is neither logical nor morally proper to hold someone liable for all actions by those who claim to be carrying out that person's ideas.

For Hick, Christological doctrines do not make good sense even if they cannot be shown to be self-contradictory. The incarnation lacks any literal meaning, and the philosophically sophisticated statements of the councils are religiously unrealistic.

The question, then, is not whether it is possible to give any coherent literal meaning to the idea of divine incarnation, but whether it is possible to do so in a way that satisfies the religious concerns which give point to the doctrine.³⁹

Moreover Christological and trinitarian doctrines are incomprehensible to most people. Hick says his Christology is both simple to understand and profound in its meaning. Again he errs by imposing his rationalism on others. The nature of Christology precludes any comprehensive understanding, and Christianity has never required such from its followers.

Hick acknowledges that those who accept orthodox Christology can find all the support they need from their own reading of the NT. We cannot, however, arrive at that same conclusion if we begin from the NT evidence as analyzed by the scholarly community. One problem Hick acknowledges is that while from his perspective Christian scholarship has begun to move down the road of *The Myth of God Incarnate* the churches have moved in the opposite direction, reaffirming traditional doctrines. Our judgment about Jesus can be neither proved nor disproved by historical evidence. It is simply a matter of faith. But conservative evangelicals with inquiring minds will face challenges to the belief system they have been taught and are almost certain to modify or discard much of that system.⁴⁰ So Hick believes inquiring evangelicals who follow the logic of their quest with integrity will follow in his footsteps.

Hick's mature Christology is open to challenge at many points. As a professional philosopher, he must know the requirements for logical argumentation. Nonetheless he commits a number of logical fallacies in his criticism of orthodox Christology. He suppresses evidence, offers straw men, reaches hasty conclusions, offers false dilemmas, charges with guilt by association, offers questionable causes, begs the question, and engages in wishful think-

³⁸ J. Hick, "Rethinking Christian Doctrine in the Light of Religious Pluralism," *Christianity and the Wider Ecumenism* (ed. P. C. Phan; New York: Paragon, 1981) 91; *Metaphor* 85.

³⁹ Hick, *Metaphor* 4.

⁴⁰ Hick, *God Has Many Names* 3.

ing, to name the more serious fallacies. The consequence of this is that Hick is able to frame the discussion on his terms and discredit the opposition before it can offer a rebuttal—and, read in a vacuum, he is quite convincing.

We have had occasion to look at Hick's epistemology. He joins a Kantian idealism with a thoroughgoing empiricism. Both the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon and the thoroughgoing empiricism require agnosticism about many subjects. They focus on the limits of the knowing subject and ignore the possibility of revelation to reveal to that subject the true nature of objective reality. But this is a premise in need of a defense, not a certainty. And it is a dubious premise. If we cannot know reality directly, we cannot distinguish true from false apprehensions of that reality. In fact there are not true and false, merely yours and mine.⁴¹ Jesus is no longer the way, the truth and the life. He is only my way, truth and life. Hick infers from the truth that we cannot know reality comprehensively the conclusion that we cannot know certainly. But as L. Newbigin notes:

The human mind cannot comprehend God, but we have no grounds for denying the possibility that God might make the divine known to human beings and that they might legitimately bear witness to what has been revealed to them.⁴²

For Hick the measure of a religion is not its truth but its ability to promote human welfare.

Theologically, Hick's most serious problem is his lack of appreciation for the enormity of human sin. According to him, sin is a natural part of our existence. We are more victims than perpetrators. The fall is a myth. If this is true, then the classic Christian concept of salvation is off the mark because it cures what does not ail us. The nature and necessity of salvation must be consistent with the problem. Salvation, for Hick, is transformation of humans from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. It does not seem to have anything to do with forgiveness of sin. So the traditional doctrine of the atonement is also out. It is no longer important for Jesus to be as the creeds (and NT) portray him because it is unnecessary. If the measure of salvation is a visible transformation of the individual from self, then Hick may indeed be correct about the salvific value of world religions. But that is a very big if, especially because empirical verification is unable to test motivation—and that is precisely where Jesus said the problem lies.

Again, sin becomes the issue. What is it in every religion that is able to effect this change? Hick is unable to explain how self-centeredness arose (unless as a product of evolution), so how can he be certain it is overcome?

⁴¹ For a concurring argument see L. Newbigin, "Religion for the Marketplace," *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (ed. G. D'Costa; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 143.

⁴² L. Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13 (1989) 51.

When sin is no longer the terrible thing Christianity has understood it to be, Jesus no longer has to be the God-man, nor need he have died for our sins. In mitigating the seriousness of human sin, Hick appears guilty of Jeremiah's charge: "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious."⁴³ Hick seems to want to retain the Christian God—in his love, not his holiness—without Christ. But that is impossible because we can have the Christian God only through Jesus.

Because Christians have misunderstood the mythical nature of Genesis 3, they have taken the idea of incarnation literally. Hick accepts the most radically critical interpretations of the NT, so he is able to deny it teaches many of the beliefs Christians have held for two millennia. But his Biblical skepticism is selective. He knows much more about Jesus than his criteria would allow. N. Anderson calls Hick's use of the Bible cavalier and notes that he freely ignores material inconsistent with his conclusions.⁴⁴ Contrary to Hick's rejection of any high Christological claims by Jesus, J. Dupuis has written:

The Jesus of history, as critical exegesis is able to discover him today through the Gospel tradition, had done and said enough to warrant the faith interpretation of his person which, in the light of the Easter experience, the apostolic Church built gradually.⁴⁵

Because Biblical criticism only became important to Hick after his Birmingham experience, D'Costa suggests it is no more than secondary to his religious pluralism, epistemology, and theory of religious language in developing a Christology.⁴⁶ Hick also denigrates the worth of later NT documents as evidence for Christology. This is a specific instance of his general lack of interest in and knowledge of history.

The Christological development that resulted in the statements of Nicea and Chalcedon was the product of a linguistic misunderstanding. According to Hick, as Christianity spread through the Roman empire, what had been myth, poetry and metaphor came to be (mis)understood literally. This included Christological titles like "Son of God" and ideas like the virgin birth and bodily resurrection. But, as C. Gillis notes, Hick's argument is not sufficient to exclude an ontological interpretation of the language used to describe Jesus. Gillis says Son-of-God language can be properly understood as metaphor, but the use of metaphor in no way tells against an ontological interpretation when that is the sense of the passage.⁴⁷ He adds that ontological language found its way into NT descriptions of Jesus early, and "unless one dismisses the relevance of scripture as in any way authoritative, one cannot ignore the interpretation of Jesus as God that is developed in the canon."⁴⁸ P. Badham suggests that when we have a question

⁴³ Jer 6:14; 8:11.

⁴⁴ N. Anderson, *The Mystery of the Incarnation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 67–68.

⁴⁵ J. Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 70.

⁴⁶ D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology* 131.

⁴⁷ C. Gillis, "John Hick's Christology," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 49 (1988) 54–55.

⁴⁸ C. Gillis, *A Question of Final Belief: John Hick's Pluralistic Theory of Salvation* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989) 95.

about the intended nature of language we treat it as propositional unless it fails to meet the coherence requirements for making factual claims.⁴⁹

Hick raises two other objections to the concept of incarnation. (1) Many religions have exalted their founding figure, and such exaltation to divinity was a common way to honor someone in Jesus' day. (2) Divinity and humanity are such incompatible concepts that to speak of a God-man is nonsense. Hick's first objection is open to at least three criticisms. The other founding figures—Hick's most common example is Gautama—required centuries for this exaltation, while Jesus' came within years of his death. The claim that Jesus cannot be deity because other traditions exalted their founders to similar status is fallacious. That other deifications were false does not require that recognition of Jesus' deity be equally false. Finally, it may have been common practice in ancient cultures to deify famous people, but all available evidence shows that Christianity sharply opposed such practices.⁵⁰ According to W. Pannenberg, those who make Jesus' deification the product of later Christians and consider it incompatible with Jesus' own words do not take seriously Jesus' own claims (and Pannenberg is not including John's gospel). He says God's presence in Jesus was a claim of Jesus, not merely an experience of his followers.⁵¹

To speak of a God-man, says Hick, is like talking about a square circle. But he is inconsistent in his objection. He sometimes says the concept of humanity is so open that we can understand it in many ways, even though this may not be helpful. At other times he is equally sure humanity is not a broad enough concept to be associated in any way with deity. This conclusion stands in contradiction to the Biblical creation account, the theophanies of the OT, and the uniform witness of the NT. Of course all these are myth as far as Hick is concerned.⁵²

Despite the serious faults in his Christological thought, Hick has shown the weakness of attempts to moderate orthodox Christology in a compromise with Biblical criticism and other modern challenges. Much of *The Metaphor*

⁴⁹ P. Badham, "The Meaning of the Doctrine of the Incarnation in Christian Thought," *Christology: The Center and the Periphery* (ed. F. K. Flinn; New York: Paragon, 1989) 86.

⁵⁰ See M. Tinker, "Truth, myth, and incarnation," *Themelios* 12 (1987) 15: "In the OT there are plenty of examples where God was encountered, especially through the prophets, but there is not the slightest indication that there was an attempt to apply the 'language of ultimates' to such people. When one enquires why this is so, then one comes across one of the most salient features of Judaism, namely its ardent monotheism, which resisted any identification of man with the divine, except in terms of divine action. And yet this is precisely the milieu in which the 'high' Christology began to develop."

⁵¹ W. Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims: The Problem of a Theology of the World Religions," *Christian Uniqueness* (ed. D'Costa) 101. Pannenberg adds that if this were part of Christian experience, not part of Jesus' eschatological claims, then claims of similar experiences in other world religions could not be readily dismissed.

⁵² See also G. Loughlin, "Squares and Circles: John Hick and the Doctrine of the Incarnation," *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (ed. H. Hewitt, Jr.; Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991) 199: "The charge of logical incoherence that Hick brings against the doctrine of the incarnation is plausible only if one first assumes an understanding of God and human nature for which there is no warrant in Christian faith or, indeed, anywhere other than in the enlightenment perspective properly characterizable as rationalist and 'empiricist.'"

of God Incarnate shows these various proposals to be less than adequate. This leaves us with orthodoxy or something akin to Hick's pluralism. Thus in a backhanded way he offers an endorsement of orthodoxy for any dissatisfied with his own rationalistic empiricism. But he also challenges orthodoxies that try to explain too much. Even though Hick rejects any appeal to mystery, orthodox Christologies cannot.

His basic objections to orthodox Christology are ethical. If Jesus is indeed the Son of God incarnate, then Christianity's claim that there is no salvation apart from Christ is true. Hick considers this unacceptable because the vast majority of humans falls outside that salvation and will continue to do so, and he says this is wrong. For him religious pluralism is a value, not merely an observed fact. God must work in a pluralistic way. Transformation is what salvation is all about, and to make this happen does not require God incarnate. A second objection is that some who have professed orthodox Christology have done terrible things. Hick holds Christology responsible for that behavior. Again, his functionalism and his misunderstanding of the nature of human sin lead him beyond the bounds of his evidence and its logic.

Hick rejects orthodox Christology because he dislikes its implications, not because he finds it unsupported by facts or logic. His assertions of illogic and lack of factual basis derive solely from his *a priori* rejection of it.

Despite his avowed heterodoxy, Hick does offer some lessons for those who remain convinced that orthodoxy is the only legitimate Christianity. (1) He demonstrates convincingly that mediating attempts and attempts to overexplain in Christology are inevitably inadequate. (2) He built his early theology on a philosophy incompatible with Christianity without considering the dangers this entailed. Christians must be aware of the philosophies they appropriate and their consequences. (3) He places great confidence in the superiority of experience as a source for knowledge—as do many modern evangelicals. (4) His downplaying of the seriousness of human sin has forced a reformulation of his Christology and soteriology.

John Hick has demonstrated neither the inaccuracy nor the immorality of orthodox Christology. He has, however, provided a caution to those who would set aside traditional Christology in an attempt to reach a compromise with modernity and to those whose worldview is not firmly grounded in Christian revelation.