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How Agatheistic Account of Doxastic Pluralism Avoids the Shortcomings of Hickian Pluralism

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The paper outlines an original solution to the problem of ‘doxastic pluralism’ understood as irreducible pluralism of beliefs (*doxa*) in the areas where knowledge (*episteme*) is in principle unavailable. The problem is explored on the example of religious doxastic pluralism, with implications for all types of ‘agathological beliefs’ (beliefs about the good: *to agathon* in Greek), which – as value-laden beliefs – do not lend themselves to verification or falsification by scientific methods. The ‘agatheistic account of doxastic pluralism’ is presented as superior to John Hick’s conceptualisation of doxastic pluralism. The Hickian pluralism is wedded to the Kantian critique of metaphysics and his epistemology of transcendental idealism and while it proclaims that different religious beliefs are ‘diverse responses to the Transcendent’ or to ‘the Real’, it is arguably unable to show how various assertions about the Real can be justified and thus how doxastic commitment of belief-holders can be explained. Agatheism conceives of the object of religious commitment as the highest good and links both the metaphysical and epistemic aspects of religious doxastic practices with the activity of ‘agathological imagination’, conceiving various religious beliefs as grounded in human conceptualisations of the highest good towards which human agathological consciousness is directed of no choice of our own (that is a phenomenologically given fact).

Keywords: doxastic pluralism, agathological beliefs, agatheism, agatheistic interpretation of religion, John Hick

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I. Introduction: The problem of doxastic pluralism

The current paper concerns a problem of doxastic pluralism understood here as the diversity of beliefs – paradigmatically axiological beliefs – that of their very nature cannot be considered species of knowledge (what Plato would call *episteme*) and therefore might better be considered species of opinion or conviction (*doxa*) that may be deeply held, but which in principle cannot be verified or justified in a manner analogical to propositions about the natural world that are tested, verified or justified using scientific methods.

The problem of doxastic pluralism underlies the question of the epistemic status of claims made in every political, ethical, aesthetic and – as I will argue – religious debate. The diversity of ethical, political, aesthetic and religious beliefs appears to be of altogether different kind than pluralism of scientific hypotheses and theories, because even though plurality and diversity of competing hypotheses and theories in science seems not to go away with the progress of science, there are no agreed standards of settling the disputes in ethics, politics, aesthetics and religion comparable with the standards employed in science. However, ethical, political, aesthetic and religious beliefs are not trivial matter – at least the impact of such beliefs on the well-being and the survival of humanity on this Planet is arguably no lesser to the claims put forward and defended by scientists. So the challenge to make sense of the doxastic pluralism and to conceptualise in some non-confrontational manner the plurality of ethical, political, aesthetic and religious beliefs is of no minor importance. Pointing to one such possible conceptualisation which might be considered plausible is the goal of this paper.

Keeping in mind the inconclusive character of the mainstream epistemological theories of knowledge about facts of the matter about the natural world (what *is* the case), I suggest that knowledge in any strong sense of the term is in principle not available in the realm of beliefs about values (what *ought* to be the case, because it is good or right or beautiful or otherwise desirable) to the degree to which such beliefs depend on the irreducibly subjective (first person) recognition of ‘the good’ (*to agathon* in Greek) that is referred to or pointed to explicitly or implicitly in the relevant beliefs. For this reason I call all such beliefs – that is ethical, political, aesthetic and also religious beliefs – agathological beliefs and I argue that they are irreducibly plural, which gives rise to the problem of doxastic pluralism (and the underlying ‘agathological pluralism’) which has to be addressed to make any debate between holders of the opposing or just diverse beliefs in these areas rational, reasonable or just meaningful (not devoid of meaning). I also suggest that the typically intersubjective (that is social, rather than solipsistic) nature of such ‘agathological beliefs’ (what is believed in virtue of strong conviction by various individuals belonging to certain doxastic communities) does not turn them into objective ‘third person beliefs’ (what is known to a community of practitioners of science using methods that yield public confirmation of claims made about facts of the matter about the natural world).

In what follows I will contrast two possible ways of approaching the challenge of doxastic pluralism on the example of religious beliefs, but hoping to bring out implications for other types of agathological beliefs, including ethical, political and

aesthetic beliefs. There are two reasons why exploring the challenge of doxastic pluralism on the example of religious beliefs seems to me sensible. The first reason is that it so happens that for variety of reasons the problem of doxastic pluralism has been widely discussed by philosophers of religion (and none of them was more influential than John Hick whom I take to the task in this paper). The second reason is that in the case of religious beliefs it is more immediately obvious that agathological beliefs tend to be related to what I would call 'metaphysical beliefs', that is beliefs about the *ultimate* nature of reality that are also in principle beyond the grasp of the methodology employed by modern science, therefore cannot be verified or falsified in a way required for knowledge in any strong sense of the term. It is my contention that all agathological beliefs – including ethical, political and aesthetic beliefs – are also always explicitly and implicitly related to the relevant metaphysical beliefs (beliefs about the ultimate human good in the case ethics, fundamental beliefs about the human nature in the case of politics, beliefs about the nature 'the beautiful' in the case of aesthetics), however, in the case of religious beliefs the interrelation between the axiological/agathological dimension of the belief structure (beliefs about 'what *ought* to be the case') and the metaphysical dimension of the belief structure (beliefs about 'what *is* the ultimate nature of the reality in question') is most apparent.

It is perhaps the most controversial claim I wish to put forward in this paper, that all metaphysical beliefs of *this* kind (so perhaps not necessarily all claims made by contemporary philosophers working in the field of metaphysics and discussing questions such as the nature of causality) are ultimately reducible to agathological beliefs. In other words, I suggest that the relation between the axiological/agathological beliefs and the related metaphysical beliefs is not what it appears: it is not the case that the 'ought' beliefs are based on the 'is' beliefs, but on the contrary, the metaphysical beliefs have agathological justification. And the easiest way to explain this hypothesis I put forward is by attending to religious beliefs. To put it briefly, I suggest that the beliefs about the nature of God, the Absolute or the ultimate reality are motivated and explicitly or implicitly justified on the agathological ground: it is believed that God *is* x (e.g., perfectly good and perfectly knowledgeable), because it is believed that God *ought* to be x (and this is believed on the agathological grounds: because it is *better* to be x, than non-x). And what grounds these agathological beliefs themselves? I suggest agathological beliefs have no metaphysical grounding. Agathological beliefs are products of 'agathological imagination' and of the reflection on the deliverances of agathological imagination. So what is 'agathological imagination'? It is this dimension of the faculty of practical reason which is intentionally directed – of no choice of ours – towards the ultimate human good and guides our mental activity leading to value judgments by imagining and comparing agathological alternatives as more or less optimal, relative to our sense of the good. Since our directedness towards the good appears to be the fundamental phenomenologically given 'fact' about our axiological consciousness, it requires postulation of a *telos* without which the irreducibly teleological character of our axiological consciousness would be unexplainable making impossible analysis of human agency by reference to agents' reasons. The ultimate good is thus postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness. Thus

the belief in the reality of the ultimate good and the beliefs about the specific nature of the ultimate good (to the extent it is at all clearly specified in a particular belief system) is agathologically motivated and agathologically justified or agathologically true (so that I will talk about ‘agathological justification’ and ‘agathological verification’: a belief is considered ‘true’, because of the goodness of the state of affairs the belief implies). Perhaps the most overarching epistemic concept that would capture the distinctiveness of the doxastic practices in the realm of ethics, politics, aesthetic and religion would ‘agathological rationality’ that will be distinct from and irreducible to scientific rationality that guides human reason in the enterprise of discovering the facts of the matter about the natural world.

II. Agatheistic conceptualisation of doxastic pluralism¹

In what follows, I will outline briefly my preferred ‘solution’ to the problem of doxastic pluralism on the example of religious doxastic pluralism (with implications for all other types of agathological beliefs), but my more concerted effort will be directed at pointing to deficiencies of John Hick’s conceptualisation of doxastic pluralism, worked out in detail in his classic *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, as arguably one of the most plausible alternatives to my own proposal.

As already hinted above, my own ‘interpretation of religion’ is an agathological interpretation of religion and I call religion so interpreted: agatheism. Agatheism identifies God, the Absolute or the ultimate reality (*theós* or *to theion* in Greek) with the ultimate good (*to agathon* in Greek) as the ultimate end of all human pursuits and posits that maximal realisation of human potentialities for good (*agatheia* – conceptualised as an agathological equivalent of the Aristotelian *eudaimonia*) is possible only in proper alignment with the ultimate reality so conceived (*Agatheos*).

Agatheism posits that religious worldviews result from the fundamental choice of an option to make sense of our axiological consciousness by conceiving the ultimate human good in religious rather than in naturalistic terms. Since it is agathological imagination that plays the decisive role in choosing among the fundamental agathological options and agathological imagination is a dimension of practical reason, it will not be possible to establish by way of theoretical argument which option is rationally superior, yet taking a stance may be a psychological necessity, as well as a condition of living an ‘examined life’, therefore opting for a religious conceptualisation of the ultimate human good that identifies the ultimate good towards which our axiological consciousness is directed with the ultimate reality religiously conceived, may be as good a choice as any.

An important implication of such axiological construal of the grounds of religious belief is that the domain of religious thinking and religious practice is no longer seen as *sui generis*, but (*pace* Kierkegaard) is an extension of agathological thinking in the ethical realm (and perhaps also in the realm of aesthetics *kalokagato-*

¹ Earlier formulations of agatheism as an agathological interpretation of religion are contained in: [Salamon, 2015], as well as in: [Salamon, 2017b].

logically conceived). Therefore religious believers do not engage in an activity that is entirely foreign to the non-believers, but rather are devoted in a different way to the same central human task of exploration into the realm of the human good that takes places in connection with every human activity aimed at conceptualisation and realisation of some human (or non-human) good.

Like the Hickian interpretation of religion, agatheism is centrally a *pluralistic* interpretation of religion, since it theorises that the fundamental agatheistic belief is presupposed by all or nearly all post-axial religious traditions and explains the fact of religious diversity (i.e., plurality of internally diverse and constantly evolving religious traditions) by reference to unavoidably plural, diverse and revisable deliverances of agathological imagination as its source. When exercised in the realm of religion, agathological imagination guided by the fundamental agatheistic belief identifying the Absolute with the ultimate good, searches for the optimal conceptualisation of the nature of the Absolute and its relation to the human world, attempting to approximate the human view of the matter to the 'God's eye view'. While individual believers exercise agathological imagination when assenting to particular religious truth-claims and aligning themselves in an existential manner to the Absolute as the ultimate good, typically religious beliefs systems are produced of the exercise of agathological imagination over long periods of time in the context of religious traditions as traditions of interpretation by many individuals, especially prominent representatives of the tradition. Thus diverse religious belief systems may be conceived as a range of 'agathological landscapes' – conceived throughout human history by geniuses of agathological imagination, such as founders of new religious traditions, saints, mystics and great religious thinkers – which agathological imagination of 'ordinary' believers takes as a reliable source of inspiration and the point of departure in their own religious search and spiritual journey.

Agatheistic account of religion takes seriously the practical orientation that religious believers typically exhibit and it sees religious belief systems as never divorced from religious practice understood as *living out* the proper alignment with the ultimate reality as the ultimate good. While various religious belief systems do contain visions of what their adherents consider to be the optimal ways of conceiving the Absolute as the ultimate good *simpliciter*, the beliefs about the Absolute and their eventual veridicality are important for religious believers not for purely cognitive reasons, but because they entail optimal ways of conceiving *human potentialities for good* vis-à-vis the ultimate reality as the ultimate good *for us* towards which their existence is directed. So whatever the religious rhetoric may be, it is more plausible to think that human beings hold religious belief and follow religious practices not because – to put it in theistic terms – God needs them to worship him, but because they sense they need God to achieve their own fulfillment by realising their own creaturely potentialities for good. For this reason religious believers (with the exception of theologians and perhaps also religious leaders who may see religious doctrines as defining the borders of their communities and thus the limits of their power) tend to concern themselves with religious *orthopraxis* more than with religious orthodoxy and associate being an exemplary believer not so much with just 'believing in something' (holding certain beliefs), but with 'doing something', 'adopting certain attitude towards God' ('believing God' vs. 'believing in God'),

also ‘undergoing something’ (undergoing spiritual transformation or moral conversion) and ‘hoping for something’. To be able to do all that believers have to hold some particular religious beliefs, including beliefs about the nature of the Absolute and its relation to the human world, but it is the more practical dimensions of the religious attitude that tend to occupy the attention of adherents of religious traditions, because it is they – rather than solely an intellectual assent to some set of religious doctrines – that appear to be relevant to the achievement of the religious *telos*, which is not different from the human *telos*, namely realisation of the ultimate human good. Among such ‘practical’ aspects of religious belief – all expressing the proper alignment with the Absolute as the ultimate good – are (a) its soteriological/eschatological perspective presupposing some formulation of the nature of the human predicament and of “what can I hope”, to use Kant’s phrase; (b) its metanoetic/transformational function presupposing some paradigm of spirituality; and (c) its relational/inter-subjective character associated with religious attitude of devotion and love, usually manifested also in solidaristic attitudes towards other members of one’s religious community.

Perhaps the most central of them all is spiritual development or *metanoetic transformation*. The Greek noun ‘*metanoia*’ – signifying a change of mind – in the biblical vocabulary acquires more specific meaning of ‘conversion’ as turning towards God, so in the context of agatheism metanoetic transformation is synonymous with agathological transformation as adoption of the fundamental orientation towards the good. John Hick identified it as *the* one aspect of religious belief that is universal across all religious traditions and defined it as ‘transformation from self-centredness to other-centredness’. The universality of the metanoetic dimension of religious belief is crucial for the possibility of a *pluralistic* interpretation of religion and at this junction agatheism does not depart from the age-old intuitions expressed poetically by the Sufi mystic Rumi in the saying that “the lamps are many, but the Light is one”, which also John Hick turned into the central insight of his religious pluralism. To the extent a rational hope may be entertained that a given religious tradition constitutes a reliable path to the achievement of human fulfillment in accordance with the vision of the ultimate human good conceived in that tradition, it is rational to be committed to the belief system and religious practice of that tradition despite the fact that there are many such paths defined by different religious belief systems, which gives rise to a legitimate suspicion that it is unlikely that only one of them – and therefore unlikely than *any* of them – express fully and infallibly the truth of the nature of the Absolute. There is no good reason to think that cognitively and morally limited creatures as human beings are could not reach the ultimate destination of their journey while having only limited and therefore fallible and revisable insight into the nature of the ultimate good as the end of the journey. One piece of equipment on such journey appears to be absolutely necessary: the agatheistic belief, or better the agatheistic faith that our human unquenchable thirst for the good which manifests itself in the good-directedness of our axiological consciousness that shapes our entire attitude towards reality does not misleads us, but rather leads us towards the fulfillment of the promise it carries.

With such a turn of mind an agatheist – whether a Christian or Jewish or Hindu agatheist – will not be troubled by religious diversity, since his agathological imagi-

nation, serving as a kind of agathological conscience, will assure him – in a manner reminiscent of Socrates' *daimon* – that one cannot go wrong going in the direction of the good, following the path that leads towards the horizon of the ultimate good. An agatheist will treat the stories about the nature of the ultimate good told by the fellow pilgrims as necessarily only verisimilitudinous, but capable of serving as reliable directions on the path towards the ultimate goal, if they pass the test of agathological verification. Since in the realm of values the nature of the subject matter confines us to the first-person perspective and admits no possibility of an objectively verifiable and therefore conclusive evidence being available, an agatheist will be satisfied a kind of moral certainty, or – better to say – *agathological certainty*. Agathological certainty as a state of mind has a certain phenomenal quality which is a source of subjective reassurance, and can be captured by the adjective 'agatonic', created by conjunction of '*agathon*' and 'the tonic' – a musical term referring to the central tone of a scale that is perceived subjectively by a listener as the point of 'departure' and 'arrival' of a musical narrative, and thus as a kind of *telos* and the point of psychological *rest*. Thus the word 'agatonic', metaphorising the musical 'tonic', takes on a meaning of 'rest of the mind in the good', or 'rest of the mind in the confidence of reaching the good, realising the good, or being directed towards the good'. This agatonic sense of 'the rest of the mind in the good' that accompanies our mental states of certainty in the sphere of moral and agathological beliefs is analogical to the sense of 'rest of the mind in truth', which accompanies our states of certainty in the realm of beliefs about existentially irrelevant facts of the matter, but unlike in the case of certainty about factual beliefs, certainty about moral and agathological beliefs carries with it a sense of fulfilled obligation and hence a peculiar kind of satisfaction that we associate with the state of happiness.

Since it is obvious that that such state of subjective certainty accompanies religious attitude of the adherents of diverse religious traditions, his agathological conscience will warn an agatheist against his inclination to see himself in a cognitively and soteriologically privileged position vis-à-vis adherents of other religious traditions and will present to him as agathologically unacceptable exclusivist theories of religious diversity as postulating serious limitation of the chances of actualisation of the potentialities for good of the majority of human beings, while a more generous interpretation of the facts about religious diversity – envisaging the possibility of realisation of much greater human good than if religious exclusivism would be true – is available.

As I argued elsewhere [Salamon, 2013; 2017a], a *theist* – who usually more often than a non-theist finds religious pluralism disturbing – can accept a pluralistic interpretation of religious diversity consistent with agatheism without losing epistemic confidence in the foundations of his *theistic* worldview, spiritual practice or moral commitments by adopting a strategy akin to the strategy of 'sceptical theism'. According to such 'sceptical pluralism' we should be sceptical of our ability to discern the full truth about the possibilities ways God leads various individuals to the ultimate fulfilment of their creaturely potential. In particular, a sceptical pluralist of the kind I envisage will argue that we should be sceptical that our epistemic confidence in our understanding of God's purposes with respect to us individually and our co-religionists somehow limits God in achieving the purpose of leading other

people – especially religious aliens – to the maximal fulfilment of their human (God-given) potential in ways that are beyond our intellectual grasp. Moreover, a sceptical pluralist will propose that we should grant that our inability to think of a good reason for allowing religious diversity to persist and indeed to flourish is indicative of whether or not God might have a good reason for allowing it. If there is a God, he knows much more than we do about the relevant facts regarding the diversity of religious beliefs and practices and regarding their soteriological, spiritual or moral efficacy in allowing various individuals to fulfil their human potential, and thus it would not be surprising at all if God has reasons for allowing religious diversity to persist and flourish that we cannot fathom.

III. Hickian conceptualisation of doxastic pluralism²

Traditionally theistic thinkers faced with the fact of religious plurality have assumed that the central truth-claims only one – namely their own – religion can be true and hence the truth-claims of other religions can be refuted by way of argument. This position is described in our times as ‘exclusivist’. John Hick’s name has become synonymous with a radically different approach to the whole issue. Hick argues that all religious traditions make contact with the same Ultimate Reality (‘the Real’), each encountering it through a variety of culturally shaped forms of thought and experience, but all offering equally effective paths to ‘salvation/liberation’. Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, although very popular in some quarters, appears to many Christian and non-Christian thinkers as highly controversial.

John Hick did not begin his Christian life as a pluralist but as an Evangelical fundamentalist firmly committed to the truth-claims of traditional Christian belief³. In *God Has Many Names* Hick, an ordained minister of the United Reformed Church, writes: *I have from almost as early as I can remember had a rather strong sense of the reality of God as the personal and loving Lord of the universe* [Hick, 1980, p. 2]. Paradoxically it was this traditional Christian conviction which prompted subsequent change of his theological views. At a certain point Hick found Christian exclusivism (which he calls ‘absolutism’), as expressed in the patristic phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, contradicting the most fundamental Christian beliefs about the infinite goodness of God and about God’s plan of universal salvation. For Hick, the logical consequence of Christian absolutism was that most of the world is condemned, and that he found *morally* unacceptable. The weight of this moral contradiction has driven him to explore other ways of understanding the human religious situation and to develop his pluralistic hypothesis.

Hick’s first step towards the formulation of his hypothesis was his acceptance of the principle of the cultural relativity of religious truth-claims which maintains that one’s religious presuppositions are primarily set according to the cultural context of one’s birth. Attending services in synagogues, mosques and Hindu temples Hick came to the conclusion that *essentially the same kind of*

² An earlier version of my criticism of Hickian pluralism has been published in: [Salamon, 2003].

³ Hick describes his spiritual pilgrimage in some detail in the introduction to [Hick, 1980].

thing is taking place in them as in a Christian church – namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine Reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between man and man [Hick, 1980, p. 5]. Hick presumes that if one was brought up in a Christian environment one is likely to grow up with the conviction that any salvation is found in Jesus Christ. If one was born in South India one will probably understand salvation in terms of being released from *moksha*. Again if one was born in Buddhist Tibet one will grow up with the religious desire to obtain *bodhi*. For Hick, to assume that one has the privilege of knowing the full religious truth only by virtue of being born into Christian family is both immoral and irrational [Hick, 1993b, p. 77ff]. Instead he thinks that the only viable option for a rational individual is to accept that *the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it* [Hick, 1989, p. 235–236].

At the heart of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis lies his assertion that the Ultimate Reality constitutes the ground for all religious experience and religious language. He rejects naturalism which asserts that nature is all that exists and therefore all religious beliefs are delusive. Moreover, he explicitly refutes a close cousin of naturalism, religious non-realism, i.e. a claim that although religious beliefs may be subjectively important, useful, and in certain sense 'true', they do not denote objects which exist independently of believer's perception [Hick, 1993a]. In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick makes it clear that he believes that the objects of religious belief, with a number of qualifications, do exist independently of one's perception [Hick, 1989, p. 190–209]. It is important to bear this in mind because in the second section of this paper I will attempt to show that it is difficult for Hick to hold this realist position while maintaining his pluralistic hypothesis.

One of the ideas which underlies Hick's theory is a shift from orthodoxy to *orthopraxis*. Denying the crucial importance of orthodoxy Hick challenges the very basis of Christian exclusivism that is the need for a response to a specific message in order to be saved. He is convinced that salvation is always achieved as far as one is in *proper soteriological alignment with the Real*, and every religion is a true religion insofar as it enables a person to establish such an alignment [Ibid., p. 374]. Thus religions could be seen as culturally determined sets of values for soul-making and points of contact with the Real. There is no need to assume, Hick would say, that only one religion is an effective mean of salvation, and therefore no need to aim at converting those who do not share our religious conviction. This is not to say that there is no place or need for an interaction between different religious tradition. On the contrary, Hick thinks that having the same ultimate goal (i.e. salvation/liberation) adherents of different religious traditions can enrich each other by sharing their experience which comes from their own *orthopraxis*.

Thus beginning with the assumptions which are undeniably Christian (the God of love wants none to perish but all to be saved) Hick arrives at a point where he refutes traditional understanding of Christianity revolving around Christ as the only Saviour. Instead he embraces a view that every religion, including Christianity, revolves around God, while the yardstick of authenticity and effectiveness of any religion is its soteriological alignment with the Real.

These basic ideas had constituted a foundation of Hick's religious pluralism for more than a quarter of a century. However, comparing *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) with *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) one can observe an important development in the author's understanding of the essence of religion. While in the previous book Hick sees different religions as culturally determined means of establishing the right relationship with the Ultimate Reality, in the latter he speaks about different religions as culturally determined responses to the Real. In other words, the author explains somewhat differently the source and nature of religious diversity. This shift is very important as in the final analysis it appears to be a shift towards theological anti-realism, and makes Hick's hypothesis more vulnerable, as I will attempt to show in the second section of this paper.

In *An Interpretation of Religion* where the fullest development of Hick's views can be found, the author gives an epistemological foundation to his version of religious pluralism by borrowing and revising Kant's concepts of *noumenal* and *phenomenal*, as well as Wittgenstein's category of 'seeing-as'. In this book Hick presents a comprehensive theory that attempts to explain all religious phenomena in such a way as to give a convincing account of religious diversity. Accepting Kant's claim that one can have no pure experience of the *noumenal* (i.e. the world in itself), and therefore our experience of the world is always to some degree a creation of our mind, Hick draws a conclusion that all experience, including religious experience, is 'experiencing-as' (a category which Hick owes partly to Wittgenstein but employs in different context). This allows Hick to say that as each person's religious experience being an ultimate source of religion is specific to himself, then one's religion is specific to oneself as regards the truth-claims inherent within it.

Acceptance of Kantianism as the epistemological basis for his pluralistic hypothesis allows Hick to alleviate some dilemmas which its initial formulation was prompting. For example, now he can explain how one and the same Real can be experienced as a personal deity in a theistic context (e.g. Yahweh or Allah), and as a non-personal reality in some other traditions (e.g. Brahman), and yet be the same Reality which a believer encounters in soteriological relationship. In the light of Kant's distinction Hick distinguishes between *the Real an sich* (i.e. in itself; as it actually exists) and *the Real as variously experienced-and-thought by different human communities* [Ibid., p. 236]. Thus the Real-as-experienced becomes a neutral identifier which allows very different definitions depending on one's perception of the Real *an sich*. For Hick, the main reason why different religious traditions have different or even conflicting conceptions of the Real is that none has direct access to it. Rather, all perception of the Real is mediated through a religious tradition which acts as a conceptual lens. This conceptual lens shapes perception of the Real, and it can be said that *each concrete historical divine personality – Jahweh, the heavenly Father, the Qur'anic Allah – is a joint product of the universal divine presence and a particular historically formed mode of constructive religious imagination* [Hick, 1993b, p. 159]. In short, Hick holds that religious beliefs are partially formed by experience of the Real and partially by the believer's imagination.

Taking these theoretical innovations into account one can sum up Hick's pluralistic hypothesis as claiming the following: (1) There is one divine reality, the Real, which is the ultimate source of all religious experience. (2) The Real transcends all

descriptions – both negative and positive. (3) No religious tradition has direct perception of the Real. (4) Each religious tradition represents an authentic way in which the Real is conceived and experienced. Different religions *constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human* [Hick, 1989, p. 375–376]. More importantly, within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness can take place. This ‘transformation’ is synonymous with ‘salvation/liberation’ which for Hick constitutes the ultimate goal of every religion (an assumption which is highly disputable, as I will show in the second section of this paper).

In the light of this new formulation of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis it is still the cultural context which is the ultimate source of religious diversity, as the different ways of experiencing the Real (e.g. as personal or non-personal) depend on ‘variant ways of being human’. Hick thinks that Muslims, Christians or Jews experience the Real as a personal One because they were brought up in the ‘mode of I-Thou encounter’, while Buddhists experience the Real as non-personal because of their ‘non-personal awareness’. What ultimately Hick wants to assert here is that different expressions of religious awareness do not contradict each other. This is Hick’s bottom line and he seems to be prepared to change some of his earlier views only to show that any such contradictions are apparent or superficial. Also acceptance of Kantianism as an epistemological basis of the pluralistic hypothesis appears to be useful in this respect. It allows Hick to assert that ultimately there can be no conflict between religions as far as their truth-claims about the nature of the Real *an sich* are concerned, because there is no possibility for an absolute truth-claim, as the Real is ineffable and unable to be understood or expressed [Hick, 1985, p. 88–95]. Hick does not deny that there is some correspondence between the Real *an sich* and the Real-as-experienced but it is hard to see what sort of correspondence it is. Moreover, one could ask on what ground Hick asserts that there exists any correspondence between a believer’s experience and the Real *an sich*.

In the final analysis what we are left with is the claim that religions are not there to teach us ‘truths’ about the Real but to evoke in us a proper soteriological response to the Real. They do it using mythical language. (Hick defines a myth as *a story or statement which is not literally true but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter. Thus the truth of a myth is a practical truthfulness: a true myth is one which rightly guides us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms* [Hick, 1989, p. 248]). The only ‘truthfulness’ of each religion is shown by its soteriological effectiveness, and there is no reason to suppose that many and very different religions can be ‘true’.

One senses that there are at least two tacit assumptions here. Firstly, that there is a consensus about the meaning of ‘salvation/liberation’. Secondly, that salvation, as conceived by Hick, is really what each world religion is all about. Hick thinks that the best way of finding out the concept of salvation assumed in each religion is an empirical one. He proposes to look at the spiritual fruits every major religion produces and arrives at a conclusion that different conceptions of salvation are specifications of what, in a generic formula, is the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to non-egocentrism. In other words, religion is effective (and ‘true’) if it is productive of love/compassion. As there is no empirical evidence

showing that any of the world religions has shown itself to be more productive in this respect, Hick concludes that each of the world religions is equally 'true' [Hick, 1989, p. 172].

IV. The shortcomings of Hickian conceptualisation of doxastic pluralism

There is no doubt that Hick's hypothesis has strong intuitive appeal. He presented his pluralistic hypothesis as something required if we are to hold in tension the idea of a God of love and the need for salvation. It can be said that Hick put into philosophical language what many people seem to believe, namely that all major religions lead to the same destination. However, the question we are facing in this paper is not whether this popular intuition is true or false, but whether Hick's *formulation* of religious pluralism is plausible. Possible weaknesses of alternative hypotheses which provide a framework by which one can claim that any religion which positively transforms lives of its adherents is valid, does not constitute an argument for holding Hick's position if it can be demonstrated that it is implausible⁴. In addition, not everybody will be ready to accept as easily as Hick does that exclusivism is rationally unacceptable⁵. There are a number of points of criticism I would like to make. I will begin with the more important ones.

The central claim Hick is making is that beliefs of adherents of religions as different as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism are not contradictory, and therefore all religions can be considered as authentic manifestations of the same Ultimate Reality. Yet, it seems obvious for most believers and non-believers that different religious traditions hold irreconcilable beliefs on many important points. Does Hick adequately address the problem of conflicting truth-claims?

Hick does not deny that various religious traditions disagree about fundamental issues. Moreover, he is aware that this situation *pose an obvious problem for the pluralistic hypothesis* [Hick, 1989, p. 362]. Yet he thinks he is able to show that conflicting truth-claims do not falsify his theory because as far as essential religious beliefs are concerned he can not see contradiction between them. Among such essential beliefs Hick finds first of all 'trans-historical truth claims', and 'differing conceptions of the Real' [Ibid., p. 23ff]. Trans-historical truth claims have to do with questions to which there is in principle a true answer, but (according to Hick) one which cannot be established by historical or other empirical evidence. Conflicting truth-claims about the nature of the universe (eternal or temporal?, created or not?) and the fate of humans at death (one life or many?) belong to this category. In the second category there is the even more fundamental religious question of the nature of the Real (a personal God or a non-personal Reality?).

⁴ Karl Rahner's inclusivism could be considered as the middle of the road position. He maintains that Christianity is the true religion. At the same time he is confident that other religions, too, can be lawful because God, desiring that all be saved, gives people his grace through these religions. Adherents of these religions must be regarded as 'anonymous Christians' until the Gospel brings them to an explicit knowledge of God's self-revelation in Jesus [Rahner, 1996].

⁵ Exclusivism has such prominent adherents as Alvin Plantinga [Plantinga, 1995].

As far as the nature of the universe is concerned, Hick reasons that as current scientific cosmologies are compatible with either perspective, therefore belief that the universe is eternal (associated more often with non-theistic religions) and traditionally theistic belief that it is created by God (and therefore temporal) are not contradictory. When faced with the fact that Eastern traditions emphasize numerous reincarnations or rebirths following death while adherents of Western theistic religions tend to believe that each person lives one life followed by a judgement to determine an eternal fate, Hick gives two answers which are supposed to show that this does not falsify his pluralistic hypothesis. On the one hand, he proposes that both these beliefs may better be understood mythologically (i.e. not literally true but evoking the proper soteriological response to the Real), and then both claims may be 'true' at the same time. On the other hand, Hick notices that it is conceivable that some people are reincarnated while others are not. That would mean that both religions are partly right and partly wrong but there is no contradiction between them which would endanger Hick's position. On top of these arguments Hick's makes the more important and highly problematic statement that the resolution of the dispute about such issues as the nature of the universe and the fate of humans at death is unimportant in the final analysis as it *cannot significantly help or hinder the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness* [Ibid., p. 26–27]. One is tempted to think that Hick tries to suggest that because the differing trans-historical truth-claims are not soteriologically vital therefore even if there were contradictions between them it would not be a serious blow for his hypothesis as it operates, as it were, on the deeper level. In addition he seems to be ready to resort to a mythological interpretation of all trans-historical truth-claims which will challenge his pluralistic hypothesis.

He applies a similar procedure when it comes to explaining how it is possible that adherents of Eastern and Western traditions have such different views about the nature of the Real (a personal God *versus* a non-personal Reality) and yet, as Hick's hypothesis says, they all refer to *authentic manifestations of the Real* [Ibid., p. 14]. Answering the critical question about the relationship between the Real in itself and the varying conceptions of the Real held by the followers of various traditions Hick writes: *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. [...] a true myth is one which rightly guides us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms* [Ibid., p. 16]. It appears then that for Hick speech about the Real is always mythological in nature. If so then again he will be inclined to argue that even if beliefs about the Real vary to such extent that sometimes they appear to be contradictory, they may well all be true because they evoke the appropriate soteriological response to the Real.

It seems that every step of Hick's argumentation is open to criticism and that ultimately he fails to resolve the problem of conflicting truth-claims which he himself recognizes as a serious challenge to his pluralistic hypothesis. First of all, Hick seems to assume that because such disputes as that about the nature of the universe, or the fate of humans at death, or the nature of the Real can not be settled historically or empirically, therefore conflicting beliefs about those issues do not pose

a problem for his pluralistic hypothesis [Hick, 1989, p. 365]. This approach is totally unconvincing, as the fact that one can not fully determine which belief is correct does not soften the contradiction [Adler, 1990, p. 19–20]. How can religious beliefs of a polytheist be reconciled with beliefs of a theist? It is theoretically possible that they both are wrong (if there aren't any gods or God), but how can they both be correct? It may be true (though it is not obvious) that the opposing truth-claims in question cannot be adjudicated, but this does not allow one to conclude that all those claims are true.

However, it has to be noted that the problem of conflicting truth-claims becomes less of a challenge for a religious pluralist if he understands religious beliefs in the anti-realist way. There can be no doubt that the overwhelming majority of adherents of the world religions making religious truth-claims think in terms of a correspondence theory of truth, i.e. in terms of the agreement of thought with reality. In saying that God is a loving Creator or denying that the Real is a person, or claiming that there are many gods, believers intend to make propositions, factual statements which describe reality independent of their thoughts and as such are subject to contradiction. In addition, they implicitly assume that the truth or falsity of entertained propositions is absolute and immutable, and is totally independent of their being right or wrong in entertaining these propositions. One who believes in reincarnation will not normally say that this belief may be true for him but false for someone else. He will rather assume that he can be right or wrong but the belief itself either is or is not true. This epistemological position is often described as realism, and is opposed to anti-realism. Anti-realists like Don Cupitt or D.Z. Philips assume that when Muslims or Christians pray to God, they are not praying to a supernatural being who exists independently of their perception because God is for them a mere psychological projection. For an anti-realist a religious proposition is always true *for* somebody, and they are true when they are 'useful', e.g. when they provide the ground or framework for someone's ethical convictions. For Don Cupitt religious beliefs about Jesus Christ are true in that sense, but he does not *really* believe, as most ordinary Christians do when they pray to Jesus, that he is alive, he is omnipresent and omnipotent God, and therefore he listens to their prayers. Cupitt does not think religious language refers to independently existing objective reality [Cupitt, 1993, p. 48ff]. For an anti-realist there can be no real conflict between religious truth-claims which appear to be conflicting when interpreted in a realist way. Perhaps Hick is an anti-realist? This question is crucial for the appraisal of Hick's hypothesis, and yet the answer to it is not obvious.

Hick's recent critique of the non-realist approach clearly shows that he would like to be seen as a realist [Hick, 1989, p. 190–209]. In the 1970s he even more firmly argued that it is vitally important to maintain the genuinely factual character of the central affirmations of the Christian faith, because Christianity could not retain its identity in any meaningful way unless the factual character of its basic assertions was insisted upon. He rejected the utilitarian view that what really mattered was a religion's usefulness, and therefore religious truth-claims were irrelevant [Badham, 1990, p. 17–21]. In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick distinguishes between what he calls 'literal' and 'mythological' truth. The first involves correspondence to reality, while the latter evokes 'proper dispositional response to X'. One

could expect that by making such distinction Hick intends to assert that among religious propositions one can find also factual assertions. However, it appears that it is impossible to point out any such assertions which Hick would recognize as such. After all he proposes to understand mythologically all particular beliefs about the nature of the Real, and not as literally true descriptions of the Real. In the final analysis Hick is inclined to hold that any religious belief that would conflict with another religious belief (and thus challenge his pluralistic hypothesis) must be understood mythologically [Hick, 1989, p. 371].

This brings us to the main critical point of this paper. It seems that Hick has only two choices. Either he is a realist or a non-realist. If the first is true, then his arguments which aim at resolving the problem of the conflicting truth-claims of different religions do not work, thus making his hypothesis implausible. If Hick is in fact a non-realist (though he suggests he is not) and assumes that religions don't make any truth-claims whatsoever, then his position becomes indistinguishable from that of anti-realist thinkers and will be unacceptable for the vast majority of the adherents of the world religions which Hick wants to reconcile.

More importantly, Hick's apparent shift towards anti-realism makes his position totally inconsistent. On the one hand he wants to assert that the Real exists independently of the perception of believers. In other words, he wants to be a realist about the Real. On the other hand, in order to resolve the problem of conflicting-truth claims (and thus to save his hypothesis) Hick allows virtually all religious beliefs to be interpreted mythologically. At the same time he would like to maintain that various conceptions of the Real are 'authentic faces' of the Real, and not mere hallucinations. But how can he know that this is the case? If all particular beliefs about the Real are only mythologically 'true', how can Hick know what is their actual relationship to the Real? How can he be sure that believers who think about the Real in realist terms are not completely wrong because in fact the Real does not exist independently of their perception? And what are his arguments to support his view that *all* conceptions of the Real are 'authentic'? Why not to assume that some of them may be authentic (e.g. monotheism) while some other may be wrong (e.g. polytheism)? Or perhaps some of them are much closer to the truth about the nature of the Real than others? Why think that all of them are equally good?

Hick faced with such challenging questions is likely to respond by stating that in the final analysis all those rather theoretical problems are not soteriologically vital, because the only thing which really matters in religion is salvation/liberation, which Hick defines as *the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness*. He makes it clear in the following passage: *But if we ask: Is belief, or disbelief, in reincarnation essential for salvation/liberation? the answer must surely be No* [Hick, 1989, p. 368]. Here we arrive at a point where the weakness of Hick's formulation of religious pluralism becomes again apparent. One can ask on what ground Hick assumes that his definition of salvation is identical with the one which hundreds of millions of Muslims, Christians or Buddhists implicitly assume? What justifies Hick's strong conviction that transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is what religion is all about? And why does Hick take for granted that all religions have the same concept of salvation or aim at the same ultimate goal? Is the Buddhist concept of liberation by achieving Nirvana

not utterly different from the Christian concept of salvation involving our existence in heaven in the presence of a Triune God? It is hard to find in Hick's works any satisfactory answers to these questions which clearly challenge his pluralist hypothesis.

He argues that because all religions are bringing salvation despite their conflicting truth-claims, therefore conflicting truth-claims are not a problem for his pluralistic hypothesis. Here we have yet another example of question-begging. On what ground does Hick assume that salvation/liberation is happening in all religious traditions? Hick points to empirical evidence. But such an argument can work only if salvation is limited to some degree of moral transformation *in this life*. However, such very temporal understanding of salvation will be wholly unacceptable for the vast majority of believers of any major religion. Both the Christian and Muslim concept of salvation clearly refers to a life beyond the grave.

There is yet another proposition which Hick takes for granted, namely that what one believes about the nature of the Real and the after-life does not affect in any way one's experience of salvation. How does he know that? Adherents of almost every religion seem to believe something contrary to Hick's conviction [Aslan, 1998, p. 111–113]. Many New Testament authors seem to maintain that belief in the messianic identity of Jesus is a necessary condition for salvation (cf. e.g. John 1:12–14; 3:16–18; Romans 3:23–38; 10:9). Contrary to Hick, Luther and many Protestant Christians would hold that belief in the divinity of Christ is much more important for salvation, than is moral transformation.

This brings me to one fundamental conclusion concerning the way Hick 'interprets' religion in order to defend his formulation of religious pluralism. In the final analysis Hick appears to be a typical revisionist theologian who does not take religious beliefs as they are understood and held by millions of believers, but ends with telling people what and how they should believe, so that his theory can work. This approach is typical of anti-realist authors and supports a hypothesis I would like to conclude with, that the only way in which Hick can defend his position while avoiding inconsistencies is by embracing the anti-realist view of religious language. Then he will have to accept all the consequences of that choice, including agnosticism about the existence of the Real, and complete 'secularization' of the concept of salvation understood as the ultimate goal of religion. Acceptance of anti-realism will allow Hick to maintain on utilitarian grounds that all religions are equally 'true' because each of them can constitute an effective means of salvation understood as the moral transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. However, he will not be able to assert that each religious tradition is an authentic manifestation of the Real because anti-realism can not provide him with any arguments to support such a claim.

V. Conclusion: Advantages of agatheism over Hickian pluralism

When contrasted with the agatheistic conceptualisation of doxastic pluralism, Hickian pluralistic hypothesis exhibits a number of distinctive features. Firstly, Hick understands doxastic pluralism in the context of religion as diversity of 'human responses to the Transcendent'. I suggest that there are only two ways to make

sense of such 'interpretation of religion': either 'the Transcendent' is not really 'Real', but is rather understood in some anti-realist way, or Hick makes in the point of departure a strong metaphysical commitment and holds that without the Transcendent really existing (in the noumenal sense) the very existence of religions (as religious phenomena) is unexplainable. It is my contention that such metaphysical commitment is groundless, indeed it is much weaker than Kant's commitment to the existence of the noumenal reality, because the phenomena that Kant is talking about do not exhibit the pluralistic nature encountered in the case of religious phenomena, therefore Kant does not face a challenge faced by Hick who has to explain not just the existence of religious phenomena (or simply religious beliefs), but also their striking diversity. Since ultimately Hick is unable to assert anything substantive about the Transcendent (such as that the Transcendent constitutes the ultimate human good), Hick ends effectively with an 'anything goes' epistemic framework for his religious pluralism, since it is difficult to see any standard of justification of his claim that diverse religions are all authentic responses to the Real, that they all possess mythological resources to convey to the believers the appropriate alignment with the Real, that they all provide appropriate context for transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, etc. Ultimately the Hickian hypothesis does not explain how various religious beliefs are motivated, generated and justified. Despite achieving relatively little, Hick's interpretation of religion comes at a high cost of the mythological interpretation of the central religious doctrines (such as the doctrine of Incarnation in Christianity or the doctrine of reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism) which makes Hick's approach highly revisionist and therefore hard to stomach for billions of adherents of the historical world religions.

Agatheism also entails some challenging ideas, since it portrays all agathological beliefs, including religious beliefs, as a bottom-up, rather than top-down affair, namely as ultimately always human constructs, formulated in *human* concepts and expressed in *human* language, stemming from the phenomenologically identifiable agathological impulse of good-directedness (desiring good, indeed desiring ever greater good) and leading to formulation over time (in human history, but sometimes within the lifespan of individual human beings, especially in the case the geniuses of moral imagination, such as great religious, moral or philosophical figures) conceptions of the human good that transcend earlier such conceptions and point to the transcendent horizon of the Ultimate Good that does not have to be, but usually is conceived of in religious terms. However, agatheism does not understand religions as 'responses to the Transcendent' (and therefore does not have to presuppose metaphysical commitments that Hick has to make without being able to justify them), but rather as a product of human search for the Ultimate Good, that results in diverse conceptualisations of the good that is aimed at and this axiological/agathological commitment gives rise to and justifies metaphysical commitments made by religious people (such as a belief in the reality of God as identical with the Ultimate Good). In this way agatheism explains in an uncontroversial way the diversity of religious doxastic beliefs, while at the same time does not leave the concept of the Transcendent empty of content, because the agathological imagination (and the reflection on the deliverances of agathological imagination) that generates

agathological beliefs provides substantive content to the metaphysical beliefs that constitute the central doctrines of various religious traditions.

Most importantly, agatheistic conceptualisation of religious doxastic pluralism (and by analogy agathological conceptualisation of pluralism of other types of doxastic beliefs) opens a horizon of non-confrontational relation between adherents to diverse doxastic belief systems, since the agathological phenomenon of good-orientedness and desire for ever greater good is a pheomenologically identifiable universal human experience and aware of the irreducible subjective nature of agathological doxastic beliefs, human beings can open themselves to agathological dialogue which – presupposing good will and epistemic humility – may in time lead to crossfertilisation, enrichment and complementarity of diverse doxastic belief systems and metaphysical commitments, rather than to confrontation and conflict that more often than not is destructive of human good.

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