

# Religious Epistemology in John Hick's Philosophy: A Nigerian Appreciation

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## Abstract

John Hick is well-known among philosophers and theologians for his philosophy of religious pluralism. Before proposing his theory of religious pluralism, however, he has made major contributions in religious epistemology and other religio-philosophical issues. His later philosophy of religious pluralism is based on his earlier proposal on religious epistemology. Hick affirmed that although religious statements are cognitive, the world is religiously ambiguous. This paper argues that Nigeria as a country riddled with religious conflicts can benefit from religious epistemology of John Hick. Using conceptual analytic method of philosophy to present Hick's religious epistemology and applicatory technique to propose how the epistemology can be appropriated in Nigeria, the paper argues that such religious epistemology will result in tolerance and peace.

## Keywords

John Hick, Epistemology, Nigeria, Religion

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## 1. Introduction

Religious pluralism is the theme with which John Hick is usually associated by critics. However, this theme is not the only one in which he has made major contributions to modern thought. There are other themes, in which his contributions are striking and as Paul Badham notes, in treating those topics, one must either dialogue with or criticize what Hick has said (Badham, 1990: p. 1). Some of these include: religious epistemology, the problem of evil, the issue of after-life and the Christian doctrines of incarnation, Trinity and Atonement. Although, many of these were developed before his concept of religious pluralism, such as those of epistemology and theodicy, it is impossible not to notice that these other contributions were the ones that culminated in religious pluralism. This is not to say that the issue of religious pluralism has been his goal from the beginning, and that he made these other contributions as foundations to his end—religious pluralism. Rather, it is these other

contributions that logically developed into religious pluralism. Therefore, these early contributions fit in perfectly well into his concept of religious pluralism. That is, it is possible to hold these latter contributions without agreeing with his concept of religious pluralism. The reverse is however not possible. To be consistent, if one agrees with his concept of religious pluralism, one would have to agree with many of his other contributions.

Hence, because this writer believes that his theory of religious pluralism can be appropriated by Nigeria for peaceful coexistence among the religions, the religious epistemology suggested by him can also be appropriated. It is the appropriation of this religious epistemology of Hick that is the purpose of this paper.

Using philosophical method of conceptual analysis, the paper begins with the background to Hick's epistemology. The background is rooted in Western philosophy. The third section then presents Hick's religious epistemology. In the fourth section, the themes to be appropriated are presented and how the appropriation can be beneficial to Nigerian society, and finally the conclusion.

## 2. Background to Hick's Religious Epistemology

For centuries, Western philosophers had been pre-occupied with epistemology, the problem of knowledge. The major philosophers, such as Rene Descartes ("father of modern philosophy"), John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume and Immanuel Kant wrote major "treatises" on human "understanding" and "knowledge". Their foci were on how knowledge was possible and the relationship between the knower and the known. Their discussions culminated in the logical positivism and analytic philosophy of early twentieth century, in which John Hick was educated. Logical positivism was prevalent primarily in the English speaking countries of the West. These philosophers understood the function of philosophy to be analysis of language, and only two types of statements were initially considered as meaningful. They are analytical/tautological statements and empirical statements. Since religious statements were none of these, they were considered "non-cognitive" or meaningless. John Hick's religious epistemology is a Kantian response to questions raised by logical positivists and analytical philosophers about religious language.

Just as Immanuel Kant's epistemology was a response to David Hume's scepticism, so was John Hick's religious epistemology an answer or response to issues raised by logical positivists and analytical philosophers against religion. Hence, Hick referred to his philosophy of religious pluralism as "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy of religion, the same description used by Kant to describe his philosophical discovery.

Hume has demonstrated that the law of causality is neither analytic nor synthetic. Kant responded by saying that the law of causality, like arithmetic, is *synthetic a priori*, that is, although having a basis other than experience, it is elicited by experience (Russell, 1974: p. 76f). Similarly like Hume, logical positivists had argued that religious statements are non-cognitive and meaningless, because they are neither analytical nor empirical. It was in answering logical positivists that Hick expounded his religious epistemology. He paralleled his answer to Kant's idea of synthetic a priori in explaining the relationship between the *noumenon* and the *phenomena*, the object of knowledge as it is in itself and how it is perceived by the knower/perceiver.

According to Kant's doctrine, three things should be distinguished in human experience:

- 1) The secondary qualities, which depend on individual sense organs and the perceiver's position in space.
- 2) The primary qualities which are objective and common to all humans, but nevertheless depend on the constitution of the human mind generally.
- 3) The thing-in-itself, which is the object, independent of the human mind, and unknowable to the perceiver.

Since the whole discussion is about appearance and reality, 1) and 2) is a distinction within appearance of the perceiver while 3) is the reality. In Hick's own analysis of the phenomenon, the distinction of 1) and 2) is not made, though there is no doubt that he would accept it.

## 3. Hick's Religious Epistemology

John Hick established an almost immediate reputation upon the publication of his first book, *Faith and Knowledge* in 1957 (Hick, 1957). As the title indicates, this book provides a forceful response to the criticism of logical positivists that faith is an illegitimate form of knowledge.

Hick had been exposed to logical empiricism (or positivism), which began in the 1920s from the time that he was at the Universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge. His writings from the time he was the pastor of Belford Presbyterian Church to the time he became H.G. Wood Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham displayed his pre-occupation with the problem raised by the logical positivists (Hick, 1960, 1966, 1964, 1963,

1964). Even in his many books of this period, whether written or edited, where the existence of God is the issue, wrestling with questions raised by the logical positivists are clearly perceptible (Hick, 1964, 1967, 1971). In his latter works, wherein he deals with the relation of Christianity to the non-Christian religions, the influence could still be detected (Hick, 1977: pp. 189-202; 1993: pp. 242-249).

Writing as a philosopher of religion in the 1940s and 1950s, Hick felt tremendous pressure to respond to the frequent critiques of analytical philosophers who contended that religious language—and thus theology—is cognitively meaningless. In response, Hick attempts to demonstrate that the truth or falsity of religious propositions does, in fact, make empirical difference in the life of a believer. Only by reconciling faith and knowledge in this sense does he believe that he can assert faith with intellectual integrity. Thus, his self-declared intent in his first book is “a bridging operation between philosophy and theology” (Hick, 1957: p. xii).

His philosophical training however forced him to acknowledge that the universe is religiously ambiguous as could be seen in his early works. None of the arguments to prove God’s existence (Hick, 1964, 1967, 1971, 1973) is valid; equally no argument to prove divine non-existence is valid (Hick, 1964, 1966, 1963). However, this conclusion does not leave us in limbo; it does not make us agnostics, for we live by experience in our physical, moral and religious lives (Hick, 1957). As it is rational for us on the physical plane to live by our experience, so it is rational for religious people to live by the experience of Ultimate Reality they claim to have (Hick, 1990: pp. 49-67). In short, it is not irrational for us to live religiously, as it is not on the physical plain, for all experience is “experiencing—as” (Hick, 1969: pp. 34-48).

Hick’s concept of religious faith as “experiencing as” is a further development of a conception of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1963: p. ii) was illustrating his theory of language with puzzle or ambiguous pictures, such as that of duck-rabbit, which can be seen as a picture of a duck facing left or of a rabbit facing right. This type of picture and some ambiguous objects are experienced as “seeing-as”. Hick goes further, and interpreted, not only ambiguous pictures and objects, but also all our experiences as “experience-as”. “But I... argue that *all* seeing is seeing-as; or rather that all conscious experience including seeing, is experience-as...” (Hick, 1989: p. 140). “Experiencing-as” involves not only seeing, but all our sense experiences: seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, and tasting. But even more than the sense experiences, whatever we “experience-as” (and it is *all* experiences that take this form), we are set to have some practical disposition towards it. What Hick is explaining here is somehow similar but not identical with Hare’s interpretation of religions as “bliks” (Hick, 1966: p. 100). “Bliks” are ways of looking at the world, or “perspectives” as Schedler calls it (Schedler, 1974: p. 236).

The most significant implication of this theory of experience is that experiences are themselves religiously ambiguous. That is, they can be interpreted religiously or naturalistically with equal justification (incidentally they are also ethically ambiguous by implication, although Hick does not defend this point). Indeed, one person could experience some events as having religious significance, while another could experience those same events as being devoid of any religious significance. The ambiguity of experiences entails that the world can be interpreted in either way. Furthermore, because that signification originates from the experiences, there can be no external imperative for interpreting a given experience in a particular way. Thus, just as it becomes impossible to disprove the cognitive meaningfulness of religious experiences, it likewise becomes impossible to prove them as well.

According to Hick, this is the real meaning of revelation: the recognition of the divine significance of what might otherwise appear to be merely historical events. Revelation as history entails that God’s presence can never be demonstrated, but only experienced by one who experiences with faith. Faith, therefore, can also never be demonstrably proven true, but nonetheless represents a form of experiential knowledge that is necessarily equivalent to all other forms of experiential knowledge. While this move is primarily reflective of the philosophical atmosphere in which Hick was writing in the 1950s, this initial concern of his (i.e. the defence of faith as a viable interpretation of experience) would nonetheless provide the foundation for an approach that would characterize all of his subsequent works in the philosophy of religion.

Hick modifies the epistemological theories of R.W. Sellars, Arthur Lovejoy, A.K. Rogers and J.B. Pratt to explain his views on the ontological status of religious realities. In discussing realism, these philosophers have distinguished naïve realism, non-realism and critical realism. Realism is the epistemological theory of how we perceive the world of material objects outside us. Naïve realism takes the objective world to be exactly as we perceive them. And analogously, naïve religious realism takes religious subjects and objects, from God to witches and the devil, to be objective beings. God, in this view is like a superman, sitting above the sky. Non-realism, in

contrast to this is the view that the religious objects are symbolic representatives, and not objective entities. Ludwig Feuerbach (Feuerbach, 1957) is a classic example of non-realists. John Hick is an advocate of critical realism, in which he is espousing the view that, although there are human and cultural contributions to what we perceive, the objects of perception, including religious objects have objective existence. However, these are not perceived as they are in themselves (*noumenon*). In perceiving them, our context or background, personality and tendency contribute to what we select, the order of what we perceive and the meaning or interpretation of the percept. The epistemologists, Sellars et al. apply their theories to the belief about material or sensible things. Defining realism, and analogously giving his own theory of religious realism, Hick writes,

In modern epistemology realism is the view that material object exist outside us and independently of what we take to be our perceptions of them. And by analogy religious realism is the view that the object of religious belief exists independently of what we take to be our human experience of them (Hick, 1989: p. 172).

#### 4. A Nigerian Appreciation of Hick's Religious Epistemology

Nigeria is one of the major theatres of religious conflicts in the contemporary society. The conflicts are not only between different religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, but also, between sects of a religion, such as that within Islam, between Sunnis and Shiites. This is illustrated from December 1980 when there was the Maitatsine uprising in Kano, through August 20, 2005 when there was a religious mayhem between traditionalist Yoruba Oodua Peoples' Congress and Muslims in IsaleEko, Lagos State on the erection of Ogun shrine in a Muslim praying ground (Elaigwu, 2005: pp. 215-217), to the current "Boko Haram" crisis (ICG, 2014) and Military versus Shiites conflicts in Zaria (Omonobi & Binnijat, 2015).

A cause of these conflicts is that there are absolutist claims on almost all divides between and within the religions—Islam and Christianity. The conflict-truth claims relate to both historical events and religious objects. It is the suggestion of this paper that if the religious epistemology of Hick is appropriated, it will reduce absolutist claims, and this in turn will reduce religious conflicts. There are three themes that can be appropriated.

The first is Hick's answer to logical positivists and analytical philosophers. The latter had claimed that religious statements are neither true nor false, rather they are non-cognitive, or meaningless. One of Hick's replies is that religious statements do have meaning as the effects of the meanings can be seen in the lives of the religious. Their lives are "transformed from self-centredness to Reality-centeredness". Indeed, this is the phenomenon that is expressed in the world's major religions by concepts such as salvation, liberation, enlightenment or transformation. According to Hick, "salvation" has two sides to it in the life of the individual. The first is the type of religious experience, somehow psychological, adequately described by Rudolf Otto in his classic, *The Idea of the Holy* as, "... the feeling of the mysterious awe"; it is the *numen*, the ultimate reality which causes the radical transformation of the individual life from self-centredness to Reality cent redness. The second side, which is the effect, is the moral side of the same experience, an encounter with the Real. It is an effect which is also metaphorically referred to as "fruits" (cf. Gal. 5: 22f.). It seems to Hick that all religions are manifesting the same "spiritual fruits" despite their doctrinal differences and this leads him to conclude that, in order to maintain a religious view of religions, they must be in relationship with the same common core—the Real.

The basis of Hick's idea of salvation as the transformation from self-centredness to Reality centeredness is a purely empirical observation gleaned by Hick in a multi-cultural and multi-religious twentieth century England, especially Birmingham. In this city, when he gets to know people of other faiths, like his Muslim friend, Hasan (Hick, 1982: p. 4), he cannot but conclude that their own spiritual fruits are on a par with the fruits of Christianity. Thus, there does not seem to be a radical difference between people of different faiths.

Each of the great religious traditions presents what he believes is at the heart of what is meant by salvation. In all the post-axial faiths, there seems to be a common criterion expressed in the Christian tradition as the "Golden Rule" (Love your neighbour as you love yourself). The outworking of this is what is understood as the "fruit of the spirit". Now when we compare each of the great world faiths, there seems to be no way of distinguishing between the effectiveness each one has in achieving this in its adherents. As Hick writes, "we have no good reason to believe that anyone of the great religious traditions has shown itself to be more productive of love/compassion than another" (Hick, 1982: p. 5).

If this transformation/liberation/salvation is appropriated as essence or focus of religions in Nigeria, the prevalent self-centredness which manifests in endemic corruption and nepotism will be drastically reduced. This is because of the level of religiosity in Nigeria. Hence, transformation from self-centredness to Reality/God-

centeredness should be taken as the sole aim of the religions. The stories and beliefs of the religions are to be taken as “skilful means” or *Upaya*, “... to draw men and women from a consuming natural self-concern, with all its attendant sins and woes, to a radically different orientation in which they have become “transparent” to the universal presence of the ultimate” (Hick, 1983: p. 135).

The second epistemological idea to be appropriated is the interpretation of religious experience/revelation as “experiencing-as”. A natural event that can be interpreted as revelatory of the divine can also be interpreted naturalistically by the non-religious. As mentioned above, this epistemological suggestion was adapted from Ludwig Wittgenstein theory of language. However, Hick added that, it is not only some ordinary experiences that are “seeing-as”, it is *all experiences*. This will make experiences ambiguous, and therefore, every religious and non-religious person has epistemic right to accept what she or he perceives in individual experience.

If the ambiguity of objective reality, whether material or religious is as explained, absolutist claim by any individual or group will be imperialistic. In a society where such epistemology is accepted, conflicts will be lessened. Nigeria could adopt such religious epistemology in relation to both debatable historical events and religious objects. This will also reduce religious conflicts.

The third appropriation that can be taken from Hick’s religious epistemology is on the ontological status of divinities. Historically and universally, the Islamic and Christian concepts of God are generally considered as identical. However, this is not the case among the majority of Nigerians. The perceived difference between Muslim “Allah” and Christian concept of God as “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” has led to conflicts. However, if Hickean religious realism is accepted in religious epistemology, the different/contradictory conceptions of the divinity will be accounted for. That is, the different conceptions of God arose from different interfaces between Ultimate Reality, the *noumenon*, which is beyond human conception which cannot be conceived as it is in itself, and the different cultural contexts in which the conceptions arose. It could even be added that it is not only Ancient Middle Eastern and Western cultural contexts of Islam and Christianity respectively that had contributed to the diverse conceptions of Ultimate Reality, even African, and particularly Nigerian cultural contexts are now contributing to our perception and conceptions. This understanding will soften fundamentalism, and hence, religious conflicts.

These themes in Hick’s religious epistemology can only be appropriated by religious thinkers of Islam, Christianity and perhaps, traditional religion. It is the thinkers who will explain it simply, with illustrations, examples, stories and other didactic methods to their followers. The religious thinkers themselves can only imbibe this form of thinking if this type of philosophy is inculcated into them in their training. The inculcation has to be done and will be accepted only from sympathetic critics of the religions.

## 5. Conclusion

In the religious epistemological propositions of John Hick, we have identified ideas that can be appropriated by Nigerian religious thinkers. These epistemological issues lead to religious pluralism, which is philosophical based. The three epistemological propositions are: the purpose of religion as transformation from self-centredness to Reality/God-centeredness, the religious ambiguity of the universe, hence religious experience as “experiencing-as”, and critical realism, the theory which account for diversity in the conceptions of God.

Thus, after presenting Hick’s exposition of these ideas and their Western philosophical background, the paper identifies ways by which the ideas can be appropriated by Nigerian religious thinkers. The appropriation of the epistemological suggestions will lessen absolutist claims, both about interpretation of debatable historical events and about religious beliefs, especially the concept of God.

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