

## Religious pluralism

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**Abstract.** According to religious pluralism, the profound differences among the chief objects of adoration in the great religious traditions are largely due to the different ways in which a single transcendent reality is experienced and conceived in human life. The most prominent developer and defender of religious pluralism in the twentieth century is John Hick. Hick uses the expression ‘the Real’ to designate the transcendent reality ‘authentically experienced’ as the different gods and impersonal absolutes worshipped in the major religious traditions. A central claim Hick makes is that, apart from some purely formal characteristics, the Real is *ineffable* in that the intrinsic properties making up its nature are beyond the scope of any human concepts. I explore this central claim and argue that it implies the dubious, if not incoherent, view that the Real in itself has neither one of many pairs of contradictory properties.

### I

The path to religious pluralism starts with the now commonplace fact that our world contains a number of religious faiths having different ideas as to the nature of the divine reality – for example, whether the divine is personal or impersonal – and different ideas as to whether our destiny, if all goes well, is to live forever in the personal presence of the divine or to lose our personal identity in becoming one with the divine. Clearly not all the different views of the divine can be true. And just as clearly not all the different views of human destiny can be true. If one of these conflicting religious faiths, Islam say, happens to be the truth, then a certain view of the divine and a certain view of human destiny will be true.<sup>1</sup> But what then becomes of the faithful members of the other religious traditions, not to mention those who are faithful members of no recognizable religious tradition? Putting aside as too implausible the suggestion that the gods of the other religions are really Allah in disguise, so that devoted Christians, Jews, Hindus etc., are all, however unwittingly, faithful followers of Allah, two main answers are possible. The first is that they (the non-Muslims) are forever shut out of the eternal reward provided for the faithful followers of Islam. This answer, naturally enough, is called *exclusivism*. The second is that they too may join in the eternal reward enjoyed by faithful Muslims, because they will have a chance in the next life

<sup>1</sup> This is an oversimplification. Within each major religious tradition there may be several different conceptions of the divine, as well as different conceptions of human destiny. But typically there will be a historically dominant view.

to respond favourably to Allah, or Allah may favour them simply because they did their best in this life to follow whatever lights they had to follow. This answer, naturally enough, is called *inclusivism*,<sup>2</sup> although there may be some doubt about the eternal destiny of those who go to their graves explicitly rejecting Allah, or those who fail to live well according to whatever lights they were provided with.

A further step along the path to religious pluralism occurs when we note, if we do, that each of the major religious traditions seems equally successful in producing, at least now and then, persons of great moral and religious sanctity. Moreover, if some neutral person were to examine the evidence in support of each of these conflicting religious traditions, she might well be unable to determine that one has any better truth conducive reasons in its support than another, judging instead that each is about as epistemically well off as the other.<sup>3</sup> And neither of these points is quite what one would expect if one of these religious traditions is basically true in its principal claims, and the others are all false, at least in so far as they disagree with these principal claims. One would normally expect the one true religion to be more productive of moral and religious saints. And one would normally expect the one true religion to have stronger available evidence in its support than do the false religions.

If the major religious traditions hold fundamentally conflicting views about the nature of the divine and/or our human destiny, if these different traditions are more or less equally successful in producing human beings who are moral and religious saints, and if the evidence supporting the truth claims of these different traditions is such that no one tradition emerges as distinctly superior, then one of three possibilities would seem to be true. First, *all* of these religious traditions are false. The ideas of the divine found among them are all illusions, as Freud maintained, creations of the human mind to help us feel safe in a world that far too often appears hostile to our deepest needs. Second, exactly one of these religious traditions happens to be true in its most basic claims, even though to the enquiring outside observer it appears to be no closer to the truth than any other major religious tradition. (Of course,

<sup>2</sup> The distinction I've drawn between *exclusivism* and *inclusivism* is due to John Hick. According to Hick, exclusivists and inclusivists agree in holding that a particular one of the world's religions (their own) is the one true religion. But exclusivists hold that apart from the faithful followers of that one true religion there is no salvation, while inclusivists allow that salvation is extended to many who are not followers of the one true religion. It is possible, I think, to believe that one particular religion is basically true without taking a position on whether salvation is or is not extended to many who are not followers of that religion. I suspect that some who call themselves 'exclusivists' hold such a view. For example, I think Alvin Plantinga uses 'exclusivism' to describe a position that is compatible with either exclusivism (Hick's sense) or inclusivism (Hick's sense). See Plantinga's 'A defence of religious exclusivism' in Thomas D. Senor (ed.) *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 191–215.

<sup>3</sup> It is unclear how telling this point is. Presumably, the neutral observer has not enjoyed the sorts of experiences that the Muslim or the Christian has, experiences that they may reasonably take as evidence for the existence of Allah, or the heavenly father of Christ.

the faithful in each of the conflicting religious traditions will be convinced that it is their own religious faith that is the one true faith.) And finally, it is just possible that each of these religious traditions is a valid encounter with a reality that transcends every religious tradition because it transcends all human efforts to conceptualize it or to experience it directly. On this view the different religious traditions include experiences of one and the same transcendent reality. But because this transcendent reality cannot be experienced directly, as it is in itself, and because it transcends all human conceptualization, it can be experienced only *as*, say, the Heavenly Father of Christ in Christianity, *as* the God of the Torah in Judaism, *as* the non-personal, infinite Brahman in Hinduism, and so on with the other great religious faiths. The profound differences among the religious traditions are due to the different ways in which the transcendent reality is experienced and conceived in human life. It is this last view that we have come to know as *religious pluralism*. And its most well known developer and defender among contemporary philosophers of religion, is Professor John Hick.<sup>4</sup> So, it is to his view of the matter that I now turn.

## II

Hick uses the expression ‘the Real’ to designate the transcendent reality ‘authentically experienced in terms of different sets of human concepts’, *as* the different gods and impersonal absolutes belonging to the major religious traditions.<sup>5</sup> And in developing his theory of religious pluralism he relies rather heavily on the Kantian distinction between the Real as it is in itself (the noumenal world) and the Real as it is experienced and conceived by us (the phenomenal world). While this reliance is understandable, it may also be misleading. For it suggests not only what Hick intends, that the Real itself, although beyond human concepts and direct experience, is, nevertheless, experienced through the different divine phenomenal realities met with in different religious faiths, but also, what he may not intend, that just as the phenomenal objects in Kant’s philosophy are existing entities (cabbages, stones, etc.), so too the phenomenal objects through which the Real is manifested in various religious traditions (Jahweh, Allah, the Holy Trinity, Shiva, Brahman, the Tao, etc.) are themselves actually existing beings or realities. Thus George Mavrodes was led to view Hick as an exponent of polytheism.<sup>6</sup> As Mavrodes remarks in response to Hick’s reply to his original piece in which he suggested that Hick may be ‘the most important Western philosophical defender of polytheism’:

<sup>4</sup> Among Hick’s many works on this subject see *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), and *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1995). <sup>5</sup> Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> George I. Mavrodes ‘Polytheism’ in Senor (ed.) *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, 261–286.

In reading *An Interpretation of Religion* I got the impression that Hick thought that Allah, the Holy Trinity, Shiva, etc., were the gods worshipped in some various religions. And in some other religions the roughly corresponding objects of adoration were ‘impersonal ultimates’ e.g., Brahman, the Tao, etc. I also got the impression that all these were distinct from one another. And finally, I had the impression that (on Hick’s view) all of these were real beings. That is what led me to the conclusion that Hick was really a serious (descriptive) polytheist.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of Hick’s response to his original piece, Mavrodes now suspects his final impression was mistaken, ‘that Hick (despite what he sometimes says) does not think that the gods, etc., of the actual religions – Allah, Shiva, Brahman, the Holy Trinity, and so on – are real at all.’<sup>8</sup>

I confess that it is bit difficult to determine exactly what Hick’s own view is of the ontological status of the personal and impersonal manifestations of the Real in different religious traditions. In part this is due to the fact that in his writings Hick often expresses the view of these deities that is held by the various religious faiths, quite apart from what his own view may be. It is also very important for him to present the views of the ontological status of these various deities that are *compatible* with his theory of religious pluralism. Given that there is more than one such view compatible with his theory, we can safely infer that his own view is to be found among them. In the end, however, I think that Hick’s *own view* is probably quite close to the view that Mavrodes has come to attribute to him. In short, I think that Hick’s own view comes closest to the view that the gods are projections of the religious imagination, creations of the human mind through which we encounter what is truly ultimate reality. That is, although no such beings actually exist, they are not simply the mental products of inner psychological needs, as Freud and some religious sceptics would say. They are mental products that are appropriate in view of human encounters with what is truly ultimate and beyond all literal description, the Real itself.

Here then, is what I take to be Hick’s reasoning on this matter. In Christianity, God is held to be a trinity and the *sole creator* of the world. In Islam, Allah is held to be a purely unitary being and the sole creator of the world. And other monotheistic faiths may hold that their gods are the sole creators of the world. Quite apart, then, from Hick’s theory of religious pluralism, it is apparent that not all of these gods can be real beings, for it is impossible that there should exist several different beings, each of which is the sole creator of the world. So, whether Hick’s theory of religious pluralism is true or false, it is clear that a polytheism in which all these deities, so described, are real beings is impossible. At best then, a polytheism in which

<sup>7</sup> George I. Mavrodes ‘Response to Hick’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 14 (1997), 289–294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

these beings are reduced to beings whose properties do not entail the non-existence of other deities can be true. And such a polytheism is compatible with Hick's theory of religious pluralism. For, shorn of their incompatible attributes – being the sole creator of the world, etc. – each deity can be a real being through which the Real is manifested to the faithful in the various monotheistic religious traditions. And similar remarks can be made concerning the impersonal absolutes in other religious traditions.

So, given Hick's hypothesis of religious pluralism, Mavrodes's original view that Hick is a polytheist is not altogether incorrect. For Hick explicitly allows that religious pluralism can accommodate such a view. But just as clearly, Hick nowhere suggests that it is his own view. In fact, he notes that 'this model will involve extremely awkward issues concerning the relations between the deities and their respective spheres of operation'.<sup>9</sup> What is more likely to be his own view is the model on which the gods of the various faiths are 'projections of the religious imagination'. On this model, as I noted above, there are no such real beings or absolutes as Allah, Shiva, Brahman, the Holy Trinity, etc. Are they then merely hallucinations, like Macbeth's dagger? Hick rejects this suggestion because he thinks that these imaginary beings serve as the means by which the Real is experienced in human life. Noting that on this model there are no such real beings, Hick adds: 'But neither on the other hand would they be mere hallucinations, devoid of any objective ground. They would be analogous to what have been called in the literature of parapsychology "veridical hallucinations"'.<sup>10</sup> The idea here seems to be that, insofar as religious believers take their experiences to be of objectively existing beings (Jahweh, Allah, Vishnu, the heavenly father of Christ, etc.), their experiences are to be counted as *hallucinatory*. For the objects they take to be real beings are in fact imaginary, not real. On the other hand, insofar as these non-existing, imaginary entities are vehicles through which the religious believer is appropriately affected by the Real, the experiences are to be counted as *veridical*.

Which of these models does Hick personally think is closest to the truth? As I've indicated, I suspect it is the model on which the gods of the various religions are imaginary beings.<sup>11</sup> But Hick's main point in *An Interpretation of Religion* is to note that his theory of religious pluralism can accommodate either model. And this being so, he concludes: 'It therefore seems wise not to insist upon settling a difficult issue which, in logic, the hypothesis itself leaves open'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 275.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>11</sup> Hick sometimes describes the gods of the various religions as 'experientially real' (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 242). My gloss on this is that the experiential status of something is settled by how it is experienced. Someone who is hallucinating an object may experience that object *as real*. But if the object is just a hallucination, its *ontological status* will be that of an imaginary object.

<sup>12</sup> Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 275.

## III

Having given a brief account of Hick's theory of religious pluralism, and having described what appears to be his own view of the ontological status of the personal gods and impersonal absolutes worshipped in the world's major religious traditions, it is time to turn our attention to his discussion of the transcendent reality, the Real.

To guide us into Hick's discussion of the Real, I will ask two questions and search for an answer to them in Hick's writings.

Q<sub>1</sub>: Is there a reality designated by Hick's expression 'the Real?'

Q<sub>2</sub>: What are some of the characteristics a reality must have if it is what is designated by Hick's expression 'the Real?'

A moment's reflection on these two questions should enable us to see that if we don't already know the answer to Q<sub>1</sub>, we cannot make any significant progress toward answering it until we learn the answer to Q<sub>2</sub>. And since I suspect many of us don't know the answer to Q<sub>1</sub>, I propose that we begin with Q<sub>2</sub> and look for an answer to it in Hick's writings.

Before seeking Hick's answer to Q<sub>2</sub>, however, we need to note an ambiguity in the expression 'the Real'. For Hick's Kantian approach requires a distinction between the Real as it is in itself and the Real as it is experienced in the personal gods and impersonal absolutes of the great religious faiths. Much can be said about the personal gods and impersonal absolutes (the Real as it is experienced in the great religions). So, let us understand both Q<sub>1</sub> and Q<sub>2</sub> as questions about the Real *as it is in itself*. What characteristics, then, must be possessed by whatever is designated by Hick's notion of the Real as it is in itself?<sup>13</sup>

Although allowing that the Real has a nature consisting of one or more properties, Hick holds that the Real is *ineffable*. He explains his view as follows:

By 'ineffable' I mean (with a qualification to be mentioned presently) having a nature that is beyond the scope of our networks of human concepts. Thus the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purposive or non-purposive, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many. However, in denying, for example, that the Real is personal one is not thereby saying that it is impersonal, but rather that this conceptual polarity or dualism does not apply. And the same with the other dualisms'.<sup>14</sup>

The qualification Hick introduces is due to the fact that in saying that the Real is ineffable, one can hardly go on to say that the Real does not have the characteristic of being ineffable. So, it isn't true that absolutely none of our human concepts apply to the Real. Indeed, Hick allows that some purely

<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I will henceforth use 'the Real' as short for 'the Real in itself'.

<sup>14</sup> Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 27–28.

*formal* concepts do apply to the Real. In *An Interpretation of Religion* he observes that ‘it would not make sense to say of X that *none* of our concepts apply to it. For it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of “being able to be referred to.”’<sup>15</sup> And in *The Rainbow of Faiths* he allows that some additional description of the Real is required in order to pick it out, and proceeds to offer such a description:

... it would not make sense to speak of an X about which nothing can be said except that it can be referred to. But that’s not the case here. This X is postulated as that which there must be if religious experience, in its diversity of forms, is not purely imaginative projection but is also a response to a transcendent reality.<sup>16</sup>

Here then is another property being ascribed to the Real in itself: *being such that if it were not real then religious experience, in its diversity of forms, would be a purely imaginative projection*. However, I believe Hick thinks of this property as a *formal* property of the Real, not a substantial property like ‘being good’, ‘being powerful’, and the like.<sup>17</sup> Of course, if religious experience is not purely imaginative projection, The Real in itself could not have this formal property unless it had the property *being real*. And being real may well strike us as a substantial property. But there is a tradition associated with Kant in which *existence* is not taken to be a real predicate. So, perhaps Hick can consistently hold the position he takes in *An Interpretation of Religion*: that no substantial properties are applicable to the Real.

Hick doesn’t define what is meant by a *formal* property, as opposed to a *substantial* property. But he does give numerous examples of substantial properties, both positive and negative. I assume that a formal property of the Real is some *abstract* characteristic the Real has that is a condition for our being able either to refer to it or to postulate it as that which is encountered through the personal deities and impersonal absolutes of the major religious traditions. And I assume that a substantial property of the Real would be a property that belongs to its essential nature. And Hick’s position, I take it, is that none of our concepts can express any substantial property belonging to the nature of the Real. As he puts it in *The Rainbow of Faiths*, using ‘intrinsic qualities’ in place of ‘substantial properties’, to say that the Real is ineffable ‘means that we cannot properly attribute intrinsic qualities to it, ... it means that its nature, infinitely rich in itself, cannot be expressed in our human concepts’.<sup>18</sup>

If the above is a reasonably correct account of Hick’s view, it should be clear that the Real in itself cannot be precisely what Hick so often says it is: a reality that totally transcends the network of human concepts. To say it

<sup>15</sup> Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 59–60.

<sup>17</sup> This description replaces the Anselmian description ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’, in IR, a description Hick was led to abandon in light of objections to the effect that it implied that the Real has certain positive substantial properties. See *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 60, n. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 28.



transcends the network of human concepts implies that the Real does not transcend all human concepts, for ‘transcends’ is itself a human concept. It would be better, I think, to say only that the intrinsic qualities constituting the *nature* of the Real transcend our human concepts. And, indeed, Hick does occasionally put the point in this more limited, cautious way. For example, as we’ve noted, in *The Rainbow of Faiths* he explains that by ‘ineffable’ he means ‘having a *nature* that is beyond the scope of our networks of human concepts’.<sup>19</sup> This is promising since it allows that formal and perhaps relational characteristics of the Real can be expressed within the network of human concepts. But, some pages later, he seems to take it all back by saying ‘It has its own nature, presumably infinite in richness, but that nature is not thinkable in our human terms – and indeed even the concept of a nature, or an essence, belongs to the network of human concepts which the Real totally transcends’.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, some pages earlier he has characterized the Real as ‘an ultimate ineffable reality which is the source and ground of everything’.<sup>21</sup> The property *being the source and ground of everything* surely appears to be a non-formal property, and one that is expressible in our human conceptual systems. Perhaps, however, by distinguishing properties constituting the nature of the Real from formal properties and relational properties that are not constitutive of the nature of the Real, these infelicities can all be parsed in a way that leaves intact what seems to be the most important point Hick needs to make about the Real: that it is ineffable in the sense that the properties constituting its *nature* are inexpressible by human concepts. For such distinctions may permit us to ascribe to the Real the features it must have if Hick’s theory of religious pluralism is true. If the Real is experienced *as* personal in religion X and experienced *as* non-personal in religion Y, we can attribute both relational properties to the Real in itself. But in doing so we won’t be expressing any of the intrinsic properties that make up the nature of the Real.

My chief difficulty with Hick’s idea of the Real is that I cannot see how the Real can avoid having one or the other of two contradictory properties. As we noted earlier, Hick claims that the Real ‘cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive’.<sup>22</sup> Most of the dualisms Hick here mentions involve contraries, like ‘good or evil’. But ‘purposive or non-purposive’ suggests contradictories, not contraries. Philip Quinn says that a charitable reading ‘demands that we construe as contraries, not contradictories, all the pairs of attributes both of whose members Hick denies are possessed by the noumenal real’.<sup>23</sup> While this indeed may be charitable, I don’t think it is a correct reading. For Hick,

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Quinn ‘Towards thinner theologies: Hick and Alston on religious diversity’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 38 (1995), 145–164.



I believe, is committed to the view that many contradictory dualisms, as well as contrary dualisms, are inapplicable to the Real, meaning that the Real possesses neither one of the pair of dualisms. Why does Hick hold this view? I believe he has two reasons. Here is the first:

But in denying that the Real is personal one is not saying that it is impersonal, but rather that the personal-impersonal dualism does not apply here. To ask whether the Real is personal or impersonal would be misleading, because it presupposes that it's an entity of the kind that *could* be personal or impersonal. And the same with the other dualisms.<sup>24</sup>

Suppose we distinguish *contrary* properties – being hot or cold; being green or red, being personal or impersonal, etc. – from *contradictory* properties – being hot or non-hot, being green or non-green, being personal or non-personal. The water in the pot need be neither hot nor cold, but it must be either hot or non-hot. Hick will agree that the water in the pot must be hot or non-hot, because water is the sort of stuff that could be either – a liquid can be hot and it can be non-hot. How about the musical note, middle C, and the contradictory properties of being sharp or non-sharp? Here Hick can say that middle C has the property of being non-sharp even though it is logically impossible for middle C to be sharp. For middle C is the sort of thing – a musical note – that can be sharp or non-sharp.<sup>25</sup> But consider the number two and the contradictory properties of being green or non-green. The number two cannot be green. Nor is the number two the sort of thing – a number – that can be green or non-green. Unlike musical notes that can be sharp, no number can possibly be green. So what must we say about the number two and the question of whether it is green or non-green? Well, it seems evident to me that since the number two cannot possibly be green, it must of necessity be non-green.

The conclusion I've just reached, however, conflicts with Hick's argument cited above. For that argument, applied to our present example, implies that the green/non-green dualism does not apply to the number two. According to Hick's argument, to ask whether the number two is green or non-green would be misleading, for the question presupposes that the number two is an entity of the kind that *could* be green or non-green. And clearly, since no number can be green, the number two is not an entity of the kind that could be green or non-green. My response to this argument is that even though to ask whether the number two is green or non-green may be to presuppose that it's an entity of the kind that could be green or non-green, and would thus be an inappropriate or senseless question if asked by someone who knows that no number can be green, it hardly follows that the proposition that the number two is non-green is false or in some way meaningless. Indeed, the

<sup>24</sup> Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> That is, some musical notes are sharp while others are non-sharp.

proposition that the number two is non-green is necessarily true. And it is precisely because every number must be non-green that it would make no sense for someone who is aware of that fact to ask whether the number two is green or non-green.

In my view, the senselessness of the informed person's asking whether the number two is green or non-green does not rest on the *question* implying that a number could be green or non-green, but on the person's *implying* by his question that (he thinks) a number could be either. Given that the person knows that numbers are necessarily non-coloured, it would make no sense for him to ask whether the number two is green or non-green. For since he knows that numbers are necessarily non-coloured, he presumably knows that the number two is necessarily non-green. But, as I've suggested, from the fact that it would not make sense for him to ask whether the number two is green or non-green, it hardly follows that the number two is neither green nor non-green.

Consider the relational property, *being identical with this pencil*. Clearly, we all agree that this property is one that no human being possesses. We may also agree that no human being could possibly possess that property. What, then, of the property, *not being identical with this pencil*? Since Socrates does not have the property of being identical with this pencil, does he therefore have the property of not being identical with this pencil? How could he fail to have it? He could fail to have it only by having the property we all agree he cannot have, the property of being identical with this pencil. Of course, knowing all this, it would be inappropriate, perhaps senseless, for me to ask seriously whether Socrates is identical with this pencil or not identical with this pencil. For by asking this question in a serious way I imply that, so far as I know, he could have the property of being identical with this pencil. But the fact that I cannot seriously ask this question doesn't show that Socrates must lack the property of not being identical with this pencil. Consider Moore's example, 'It is raining outside, but I don't believe it'. As Moore noted, it could be true both that it is raining outside and that I don't believe that it is raining outside. But there is, nevertheless, something paradoxical in my sincerely asserting 'It is raining outside but I don't believe it'. For in asserting that it is raining outside, I imply that I believe it is. And when I go on to add that I don't believe it is raining outside, I appear to be rejecting what I have implied in assertively uttering 'It is raining outside'. But from the fact that it would be inappropriate and paradoxical, if not senseless, for me to assertively utter 'It is raining outside, but I don't believe it', it hardly follows that *what* I assert cannot be true. And I think a similar point holds for 'Is the number two green or non-green?' The fact that it would be inappropriate or senseless for the informed person to seriously ask this question doesn't justify the conclusion that the number two has neither the property of being green nor the property of being non-green.

In light of these remarks, suppose we ask whether the Real in itself is good or non-good, personal or non-personal. Since Hick clearly states that the Real lacks the property of being good, and lacks the property of being personal, by my lights his view implies that the Real in itself has the property of being non-good, and has the property of being non-personal. Of course, if Hick were to agree that the Real is non-personal, this could create a serious difficulty for the assessment of religions favouring personal deities as opposed to religions favouring non-personal absolutes. For if the Real is non-personal, the religions favouring non-personal absolutes might more closely approximate the Real in itself than do the religions favouring personal deities.

Writing of the Real itself, Hick says:

... if we regard the major religious traditions as humanly conditioned responses to such a reality we have a reason to think that these concepts do *not* apply to it – namely, as I pointed out just now that if they did it would have *mutually contradictory* attributes, such as being personal and being non-personal, being a creator and not being a creator and so on. So if, in view of their fruits in human life, you regard Buddhism, advaitic Hinduism, and Taoism, as well as the theistic faiths, as responses to the ultimate, you must postulate a reality to which these conceptual dualisms do not apply, although it is nevertheless humanly thought and experienced by means of them.<sup>26</sup>

This passage can only be read as asserting that neither one of these pairs of contradictory attributes is applicable to the Real in itself. And I think there is a good reason why Hick needs to hold that the Real in itself is neither personal nor non-personal. For if the Real in itself should turn out to be personal, as well as the creator of all that is, we run the risk of demoting the Real in itself into one of the personal gods of the theistic religions. And it was, in part, to avoid the problem of holding that one religious faith has the truth, while the others are substantially false, that led Hick to postulate the Real in itself in the first place. So, in order to avoid this possibility, Hick is driven to postulate the Real in itself, declaring that it cannot have either one of the pairs of contradictory properties that get exhibited among the personal gods and non-personal absolutes of the major religious traditions. This is a laudable aim. Unfortunately, it requires the price of postulating a reality that is in itself neither personal nor non-personal, neither finite nor non-finite, neither loving nor non-loving, neither spiritual nor non-spiritual, etc.

Our first question, ‘Is there a reality designated by Hick’s expression “the Real?”’, can now be dealt with. Hick’s answer is that he does not know. He postulates the Real in order to provide a favourable account of the religious diversity in the world, an account he thinks provides the best explanation of the apparent equal ability of these diverse faiths to produce persons of great moral and religious sanctity. But since he thinks there is no way of establishing that religions are not simply illusions, he is not prepared to declare

<sup>26</sup> Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 64 (italics mine).

that there is a reality designated by ‘the Real’. My own answer is that there is no reality designated by Hick’s expression ‘the Real’. I say this because Hick takes it to be a necessary feature of the Real in itself that it does not have the property of being personal.<sup>27</sup> That is, he thinks it is true that the Real in itself is not personal. But if it is true that the Real in itself is not personal, it is exceedingly difficult to deny, as Hick does, that the Real is non-personal.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, I take it to be a necessary truth, if not a truth of logic, that whatever is real is either personal or non-personal. So, by my lights there can be no such thing as Hick’s Real in itself.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> From the fact that Hick takes it to be a necessary feature of the Real in itself that it does not have the property of being personal, it doesn’t strictly follow that the Real doesn’t have that property. Hick could be mistaken about this point. But I am here taking Hick’s conception of the Real to be *definitive* of the nature of the Real.

<sup>28</sup> One can perhaps delay the denial by taking the ‘not’ in ‘the Real in itself is not personal’ as an external, rather than an internal negation. So, ‘the Real in itself is not personal’ may be taken to express something like ‘it is not the case that the Real in itself is personal’. But, on a Russellian account, the external reading in conjunction with Hick’s assumption that ‘the Real’ does refer to a genuine reality will imply the internal reading on which the Real is asserted to not have the property of being personal.

<sup>29</sup> I’m grateful to Michael Bergmann, John Hick, and William Wainwright for insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.