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THE INCONSISTENCY AND RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF JOHN HICK'S RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Abstract. In this paper I argue that although John Hick interprets both theistic and impersonal conceptions of the Absolute as equivalent, by emphasizing the unknowability of the Absolute he implicitly understands it as actually impersonal. The inconsistency in Hick's thought lies in his use of a pluralistic framework rooted in theistic origins while infusing it with non-theistic worldview content. I argue that only on the basis of theistic assumptions does the diversity of religions present a fundamental problem that requires the kind of complex theory that Hick develops. Since Hick does not really believe in a theistic Absolute, his theory of religious pluralism ultimately lacks the need for formulation. In the context of Hick's personal mystical experience of the Absolute as impersonal, his theory of religious pluralism seems to have functioned as a rhetorical tool for indirectly expressing his theological belief in the impersonal Absolute. The direct expression of this belief would have required – within the constraints of Western academic discourse, which was Hick's primary platform for expression and which, particularly in Britain, is predominantly rationalistic and agnostic-atheistic – extremely challenging arguments.

Keywords: religious pluralism, theism, nontheism, impersonal concept of Absolute, mystical experience, inconsistency.

Introduction

John Hick's concept of religious pluralism, included in the work *An Interpretation of Religion* from 1989, has received great interest, part of which has been a huge polemic¹ with it. It is one of the first, extensively presented philosophical and theological theories proclaiming the equality of world religions. In this very article I focus on this theory, without paying attention to Hick's earlier attempts at pluralism of a clearly theistic nature².

The natural tendency of any concept of religious pluralism is, on the one hand, to appreciate each religion against the depreciation from all the others,

which means, on the other hand, to deprive each of them of the right to feel superior to the other. In a declarative sense, John Hick's concept also goes in this direction. The problem, however, is that in his actual theoretical practice this direction is not consistently followed. As will be shown, Hick *de facto* indirectly invalidated the particular importance of theism. This is the most unexpected blow to theistic religions, which are primarily referred to as "religion" in the West.

The most important discrepancy in Hick's thought lies in exposing the structure of pluralistic thinking with theistic origins, but filling it with a non-theistic worldview content. As I will argue in this article, the whole problem of religious pluralism is a problem that is relevant only on the basis of theism, and only on the basis of theism does it require an extensive explanation – as extensive as Hick provided. If this problem is not solved, God's communication with the world and his intervention in it will be undermined. Meanwhile, on the basis of non-theistic concepts, the multiplicity of religions does not require an extensive explanation, because it can then be simply explained by the thesis that it simply results from some error (derived from cultural conditions, spiritual immaturity, bad karma, etc.). In particular, there is no need to develop theological reflection, which is always a great challenge in itself, and which would explain the ways in which the Absolute interacts with the world, because in this approach the Absolute either does not exist or does not intentionally interact with people. Therefore, if Hick undertakes the issue of explaining the multiplicity of religions in the form of an extensive theory, there must be a (more or less hidden) theistic conceptual legacy underpinning his motivation. This thesis corresponds to the observation that he visibly attempts to reappropriate the traditional theistic image of God.

The problem, however, is that, on the other hand, as we will see, Hick leans more or less clearly towards the concept of an impersonal Absolute. The thesis on the existence of the unknowable Absolute, which is declaratively crucial for his pluralism, also relativizes the impersonal concept of the Absolute (for the purposes of this article called a theological impersonalism), but from various data contained in his writings it can be concluded that the thesis on the unknowability of the Absolute is actually not in opposition to impersonal ideations of the Absolute. On the pages of *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick's philosophical and theological worldview seems to be undergoing a transformation: from the previous, theistic one, present throughout his professional career, to a new, non-theistic, impersonal one. Consequently, we must agree with the opinion that "(...) It is clear that Hick is much more at home with Eastern models of religious reality than with

the tradition into which he was, as he says, born.”³ In this light, however, the entire project of creating the concept of religious pluralism turns out to be, as has been said, unnecessary.

In his concept of religious pluralism, Hick retained the theistic thought structure, but filled it, above all, with non-theistic, impersonalistic content, one that made this structure redundant. It is quite probable that such an approach was dictated largely by a personal fact, which the philosopher himself reported in a non-academic statement: the fact of having had a mystical experience that consisted in a contact with an impersonal Absolute (and, apparently, never having had a mystical experience that would have been an experience of a personal Absolute). In this way, religious pluralism seems to have served Hick as a rhetorical tool for indirectly expressing his theological impersonalism. To express it directly would require, from the point of view of the Western academic discourse – which for Hick was the only platform for expression and which, at least in Great Britain, is overwhelmingly rationalistic and agnostic-atheistic – to make extremely challenging arguments.

Let's now take a closer look at these issues.

Canceling the value of theism

According to Hick, the Absolute, defined as the Real, is completely unknowable and beyond the scope of human concepts (applying Kantian terminology, he calls it the *Real an sich*). However, this is not typical agnosticism, which in about every theological reflection stands for the final word on God. In this context, the Absolute is called the Real because – apart from the fact that he exists – even the most basic things cannot be said about him⁴. It is impossible to say whether he is good or bad, personal or impersonal. People, depending on their culture, perceive him through their own conceptual framework, as a result of which the Absolute appears as personal (these are, as Hick calls them, the *personae* of the Real) or impersonal (the *impersonae* of the Real). The first case occurs in theistic religions, while the second can be found, for example, in Buddhism, Vedanta Advaita or Taoism. The *personae* are not part of the Absolute in itself, but only a property of man's relationship to it, provided that he is open to the Absolute in the “I-Thou” attitude⁵. Not in its essence thus, but in relation to us, the Real is therefore either personal or impersonal⁶. It is completely different in itself, totally unknowable. In other words, “the Real is in itself transcategorical, but is humanly experienced in a variety of forms which ex-

ist only in relation to those for whom they are the objects of their religious attitudes.”⁷

This sharp agnosticism of Hick’s is, of course, very problematic from the point of view of any spirituality and religiosity, but especially from the theistic point of view. It is so, for it does not account for the religious or mystical experience about which most people on earth say that they experience deity as a person with whom they are in contact through a dialogue called prayer. Not only does it not account for it, but, worse still, it undermines its credibility.

It seems that when analyzing Hick’s thought – similarly to that of any other philosopher – we should adopt the general rule that we need focus not only on his declarations, but also on the statements that he makes in passing or that he implicitly assumes. If we do so, it turns out that *An Interpretation of Religion* actually favors what he calls the *impersonae* of the Absolute. Despite the fact that he defines the Absolute as unknowable, we can also find in his text statements stating that the Absolute *an sich* is impersonal, **i.e. exactly the same as the *impersonae* of the Absolute.** On the one hand thus, in *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick says that “the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* in one of its developments, namely as an anti-concept excluding all concepts, provides a good symbol for the Real *an sich*.”⁸ On the other, elsewhere in this work he mentions *sunyata* amongst the “**nonpersonal ultimates**”⁹, alongside such concepts as *brahma*, *nirvana*, *tathata*, and *tao*¹⁰.

Regardless of these terminological consistencies, it is worth noting that the seemingly non-obvious connection between unknowability and impersonality is understandable once we realize that if the total unknowability of the Absolute is acknowledged, **there is no way to attribute a personal character to it.** *The Real an sich*, being once and for all unknowable, is **undoubtedly also non-personal.** True, it could be said that it is also non-impersonal, but this non-impersonality will not change much in our conclusions, because it is fully in harmony with the concept of unknowability. In the concept of non-impersonality, in its first layer we encounter an unknowable being, because it is the negation of personal characteristics, and then an even more unknowable being, as it is the negation of this negation.

What characteristics could be attributed to an impersonal spiritual reality which, on the one hand, has by definition no resemblance to the personal world, and which, on the other hand, more fundamentally, **as an immaterial reality**, has no resemblance to the material world (animate and inanimate) from the very beginning? Of course, none: we do not know any

properties other than the properties (physical and mental) of persons, animals, plants and inanimate nature. However, if we cannot attribute any features to the *impersonae* of the Absolute, then they do not have them, and therefore the entities described by them should be defined as unknowable – **and therefore the same as the *Real an sich***. The unknowable is therefore impersonal, and the impersonal is unknowable. In this way, as we see, Hick unambiguously, although indirectly, gives priority to the *impersonae* of the Absolute, suggesting **their essential semantic identity with the concept of the *Real an sich***.

Could personality be a feature of the Real in some deep, unknowable sense? Such a thesis is possible. In such an approach, Hick would not exclude the personal character of God, but this character would be so unique that it would be *de facto* unknowable to people. However, we do not see Hick's argument going in this direction. What we see is a decisive emphasis on the claim that the concept of the Absolute and the concept of the person are mutually exclusive.

Hick was probably already thinking in this way when writing *An Interpretation of Religion*, which he expresses in statements slightly later than this publication – more precisely: ones later than the second edition of this book in 2004 (the first, let us remember, comes from 1989). As if despite all the precautions he took in this book to preserve the transcategorical character of the Real and not to talk about what it is or what it is not in its essence, in numerous statements after 2004, Hick *expressis verbis* denies any, and therefore also apparently the possible, deeply unknowable personal character of the Absolute.¹¹ In the book *Between Faith and Doubt*, published in 2010, Hick points out the contradiction between the idea of a person and the limitlessness usually attributed to the Absolute. A similar thought is contained in an article from the same period: in this article, wrapping up his argument, Hick comes to the definitive conclusion that **“an infinite person is a self-contradiction. God cannot be both a person and Infinite.”**¹²

As we can see, in these statements Hick is not only talking about **human imagining of the Absolute**, pointing to their contradictory nature – as he seemed to do mainly in *An Interpretation of Religion*. It does not speak of a particular conception of the person, which, when applied to the concept of deity, raises difficulties, without, however, closing the door to the conclusion that some other highly subtle conception of the person could be better applied to the divine Absolute. Hick is **talking about the thing itself**, the divine reality, the personal understanding of which he finds self-contradictory.

The lack of contradiction between the impersonal and unknowable definition of the Absolute is also revealed from the perspective of the mentality of an individual who believes only in the *impersonae* of the Absolute. This individual does not conduct any dialogue with the Absolute, but only meditates on it. However, meditation can take place beyond cognitive categories, focusing on elusive emotional or spiritual states experienced by the meditator himself. This is why *śunyata*, which excludes all concepts, can be the center of Buddhist spirituality. The meditator's task can be described as enjoying this reality for the sake of one's own enlightenment or liberation, rather than knowing it, let alone putting it into some more complex conceptual categories. Therefore, the thesis that its subject is a completely unknowable reality does not violate the character of meditation.

As we can see, Hick's religious pluralism, whose obvious declared goal is to value all religions, unexpectedly leads to questioning the sense of theistic religion. It presents an image of a theistic religion in which its adherents cannot recognize it. One gets the impression that in his theoretical reconstruction of the phenomenon of religion, Hick explained a completely different phenomenon than he originally intended, and one different than what any religious person naturally concerned about the multiplicity of religions would expect.

Let us now look at other forms of the primacy given to theological impersonalism in *An Interpretation of Religion*. In the following considerations, we will discuss the form of this primacy, which is expressed in the form of belittling the value of the religions of indigenous peoples, i.e. the "primitive" religions, and then in the form of exposing the view that derives morality from the unknowable *Real an sich*.

The primacy of impersonalistic content and the disregard of indigenous religions

Referring to Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age (*Achsenzeit*), John Hick introduces the concept of pre-axial and post-axial religions, assuming that the former are still present among the indigenous peoples of Africa and South America or Oceania¹³. Post-Axial worldviews include Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism), as well as Far Eastern religions (Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism), Persian religions (Zoroastrianism) and Greek religions (philosophical rationalism). Hick focuses his attention mainly on the "great five" religions

that have the status of "world religions": Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism.

In his view, pre-axial religion is about concern for the stability of life, the unity of a social group, its purpose being **"to keep fragile human life on an even keel."**¹⁴ According to Hick, these functions of the religion of indigenous peoples are good, but there are important values that they lack: namely, there is "no thought of renouncing the established goods of this life"¹⁵, "no sense of a higher reality in relation to which a limitlessly better future is possible"¹⁶. Post-axial religion preaches this renunciation, assumes this better reality, aims at the "radical transformation"¹⁷ of man, discovers transcendence. In post-axial religion there is a pursuit of "salvation/liberation", which is "the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness"¹⁸. Post-axial religions are the "great world faiths", which, precisely because of their postulate of radical transformation, have a soteriological character¹⁹. All these reflections are the basis for Hick to formulate criteria for assessing religious phenomena, namely that these phenomena "have greater or less value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation"²⁰, that is, as it is easy to see, the extent to which they are like post-axial religions²¹.

As can be seen, in the definitions of what post-axial religions, and in particular the "Great Five", do, there is a connection between the primacy of asceticism ("renouncing the established goods of this life", "radical transformation") with an emphasis on soteriology. In this way, Hick can combine both ascetic but non-personalistic Buddhism and soteriologically oriented non-ascetic but theistic Islam into one category. In his approach, both phenomena: asceticism and emphasis on soteriology, mean the same type of distance from life and what is temporal. Apparently, in his understanding, indigenous religions do not fit into this pattern; they do not supposedly distance themselves from the goods of this world, nor do they particularly emphasize the superiority of the other.

So, as we can see, John Hick chose not to treat the religion of indigenous peoples as a religion in the full sense of the word. This attitude is explained as stemming from the remnants of colonial thinking, the focus on "textocentric historiography" or even racism²². It seems, however, that it is more about loyalty to the spirituality of the East, which recognizes theological impersonalism and at the same time emphasizes the primacy of asceticism. Ascetic impersonalism shows some similarities to soteriologically oriented theistic religions – however, if non-ascetic primary religions were added to this set, then these similarities would lose their significance. Theological impersonalism would have to leave the esteemed group of world religions – its asceticism could no longer be an excuse to stay there.

Moreover, regardless of the connections with the East, impersonalism, if it becomes the basis of some spiritual path, is usually associated with the primacy of asceticism. In order to connect with the impersonal ultimate reality, a special effort must be made to overcome the current state of affairs. This situation differs from theism, which emphasizes, or at least, it seems, should emphasize the role of divine grace, and therefore the redundancy of any special, titanic effort in soteriology or mysticism (as we know, in some religions declaratively based on grace, e.g. Catholicism, this redundancy is not taken care of very zealously). One of the most important forms of effort, which, according to various worldviews, contributes or even causes connection with the ultimate reality, is asceticism.

In Hick's thinking, therefore, the primacy of impersonalism was unexplainedly combined with the ascetic ideal. But the primacy of asceticism is missing in indigenous religions. Therefore, even though these religions are in terms of their theism significantly similar to Judaism, Christianity or Islam accepted by Hick, and very unlike impersonalistic Buddhism, he did not take them into account at all in his pluralistic reflection. Hick seemed to sacrifice their clearly theistic character in order to obtain and preserve what he apparently secretly cared about most: the primacy of the essentially impersonal content of his religious pluralism – theological impersonalism.

Deriving morality from the unknowable *Real an sich*

Although, according to Hick's explicit claims, personality and impersonality are, as we have seen, equally relative responses to the Real, hatred or evil, when viewed in the context of a relationship with the Real, turn out not to be as valuable responses as love or good. According to Hick, love or good are man's **authentic** responses to the Real, while evil or hatred are **inauthentic** responses to it. The goodness and spiritual strength of people of a specific religious tradition are for him as much as **a test**, one confirming whether this tradition is really a response to the Absolute (as opposed to a sect or pseudo-religion such as Hitlerism). Hick reaffirms this approach stating that it is "the test by which both Christians and people of the other major faiths judge the authenticity of religious experience is its moral and spiritual fruit in human life."²³ This fruit, in particular, is a departure from egoism and inner peace, a "human transformation from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the Transcendent, this salvific transformation being expressed in an inner peace and joy and in compassionate love for others."²⁴

It is natural thus to ask how it is possible that “the Real is such that, for example, love of one’s fellow humans is, and hatred of them is not, an appropriate response to the Real;” if, in accordance with Hick’s strong agnosticism “it does not follow from this that the Real in itself loves or is loving.”²⁵ If the Real is so completely unknowable that we certainly cannot experience its love and therefore goodness in it, **how could *homo religiosus* even come up with the idea of being good or loving because of the nature of the Real?** After all, even in theistic approaches, the importance of the commands to do good that God imposes on people through the mouth of religious leaders is invariably emphasized, despite the fact that pointing to the divine nature itself, emanating goodness and love, could be a sufficient basis to encourage believers to act morally. And in Hick’s work there isn’t even any mention of such an emanation.

It turns out, however, that the versions of theological impersonalism typical of the East, especially Buddhism, in a way as incomprehensible as Hick – but in a manner as confident and decisive as he – link the impersonal character of the ultimate reality with an almost enthusiastically altruistic ethics. It should be admitted that this incomprehensibility may be particularly incomprehensible to many Westerners who try to derive morality from the thesis about a personal God, often proclaiming – e.g. through the mouths of Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky or Sartre – that the rejection of the idea of a personal God leads or may lead one to reject all altruistic ethics and adopt a complete moral anomie.

Meanwhile, for example, for Buddhist thinking, linking such altruistic ethics with an unknowable ultimate reality is not an insurmountable difficulty. Let us note, for example, that the Dalai Lama derives moral and spiritual commands from the “ineffable” reality. He says that the “healing power of the spirit” flows from the “ineffable substance of the mind and the heart of man²⁶, a substance that nearly imposes specific “dictates” on us²⁷.

Accordingly, it seems that (seen from the point of view of Westerners) the inconsistencies of impersonalism, which is the source of moral commands, automatically became the inconsistencies of Hick himself. This peculiarity of views also indicates that his religious pluralism, despite declarations to the contrary, can be interpreted as dominated by theological impersonalism, in particular the one that is most influential in the West – Buddhism.

Let us now turn to an attempt at explaining the discussed inconsistencies of Hick’s religious pluralism.

Theistic conceptual legacy

It seems that the source of the inconsistency of Hick's religious pluralism is the clash of **two factors in his thinking: the theistic thought structure, which lies at the source of his extensive concept of religious pluralism, and the impersonalistic content contained in this structure – the impersonalistic worldview, to which he gives primacy.** In the first case, the conclusions contained in *An Interpretation of Religion* were certainly influenced by the enormous theistic conceptual legacy, which was the result of professing theism for almost his entire life. This was what brought his concept of religious pluralism into existence. Even on issues relating to the plurality of religions, Hick took a theistic position shortly before *An Interpretation of Religion*²⁸. The second factor that certainly influenced Hick's religious pluralism was a direct result of his personal religious experience in which he experienced, as he said, the Absolute in an impersonal way. His testimony indirectly shows that he has never experienced divinity in any other way in his entire life.

Let's first take a closer look at the first factor – its important element has already been highlighted in this article.

If the differences between religions consisted only in inconsistencies between different views, the problem of multiplicity would be a big one, because all inconsistencies regarding our judgments lead psychologically – although not necessarily logically – to doubting the possibility of knowing the truth at all. They have been doing this since ancient times, and probably even earlier. But if the problem of multiplicity were limited to this psychological-cognitive issue, it would not be particularly dramatic. Cognitive difficulties do not lead to the problem of the multiplicity of religions as a **fundamental**, existentially fundamental problem. This problem becomes fundamental when we realize that what is at stake are not only cognitive, psychological or social issues, but also philosophical, religious and existential problems. The problem of the multiplicity of religions – and consequently the problem of religious pluralism – is a religious problem. Every religious pluralist presents to the world not only a certain theory, but his religious view, his faith.

If we realize that there are many incompatible religions which solemnly, through the mouths of their greatest authorities, proclaim that it is only in them that God has revealed himself most fully, a very fundamental doubt arises whether **God is fair at all in revealing the truth, and also whether he has anywhere manifested himself and may manifest himself in the future.**

The scandal of the multiplicity of religions is that religiosity makes sense when one is convinced that a deity is or can be close, because only then does one have a guarantee that the deity can help him. However, if God could not be close to man in the cognitive sense – because the multitude of doctrines of the world's religions leads to such a thesis – then on what basis could man believe that **God is close to him in any other senses?**

If there is any doubt as to whether God reveals himself anywhere in religions, a pessimistic perspective emerges that he does not interfere at all in people's lives and is unable to take care of them. Thus – at least from the theist's point of view – the foundations of the meaning of life are undermined and the door to despair is opened. The problem of the multiplicity of religions therefore becomes **fundamental**, because its failure to solve it leads to the denial of theism and potentially to **despair**. In this context, it requires a **specific explanation in the form of a theory**. It has been noticed that in religious thinking the issue of the multiplicity of religions is the second most important issue after the problem of evil²⁹. However, it seems that in principle the issue of the plurality of religions is an inherent part of this problem.

Let us note that outside the context of theism, the problem of the multiplicity of religions disappears as a fundamental one – it ceases to be a problem that requires some special explanation in the form of a theory. On the basis of atheism or agnosticism, religion and the multiplicity of religions are not a particularly important existential problem, but only – as a source of conflict – an issue of a social or cultural nature, an issue that will disappear when humanity undergoes a process of greater education or economic emancipation. What is of particular interest to us in this article is the observation that on the basis of the impersonal concept of ultimate reality, i.e. on the basis of the position that the Absolute does not reveal itself – or at most is somehow perceptible thanks to the spiritual effort of man – the multiplicity of religions is also not a special problem. This multiplicity can then be explained with a few sentences stating that religious inconsistencies are caused simply by human error. First of all, religion itself as a concept based on the idea of grace is, in the light of impersonalism, a form of error. Of course, God is not responsible for this error, because in this concept there is simply no personal God, i.e. also a free and responsible one. Man and his ignorance (resulting from spiritual immaturity or cultural conditions) are responsible for all religious contradictions and the problems they entail. From the point of view of impersonalism, the multiplicity of religions is a psychological and cognitive problem, but not an existentially fundamental one.

Therefore, if Hick undertakes to create a theory explaining the reasons for the emergence of the multiplicity of religions, there must be reasons other than impersonalism behind this intention. What must stand is most likely a theistic conceptual structure. Regardless of the impersonalistic preferences present in *An Interpretation of Religion* shown earlier in this article, it must be stated that the presence of such a structure is visible in the form of a number of other intellectual decisions that closely refer to theism. It is worth noting that the British philosopher seems to act as a theistic host who agrees to also use the traditionally theistic term “religion” for impersonal concepts of ultimate reality³⁰. More importantly, Hick seeks to give the concept of the unknowable Absolute, which is at the center of his pluralistic reflection, the traits of a mainstream Christian concept, arguing that the concept he adopts is fundamentally consistent with the religion’s respected apophatic tradition. Moreover, Hick believes that he is adopting a concept of the Absolute that is directly in the mainstream of Christian thought, and in his opinion he is doing nothing more than making a slight correction to this concept based on what “the great thinkers”³¹ have claimed about it. Hick says: “Transcategoriality excludes the attribution of properties either positively or negatively. This is in fact taught by virtually all the great thinkers of the different traditions (...)”³² – including Calvin³³. To support his thesis about the unknowability of the Absolute, Hick even quotes Thomas Aquinas³⁴.

As it is easy to notice, this last decision is particularly problematic, considering the well-known fact that Thomas Aquinas also proclaimed the partial knowability of God, understood in analogical knowledge. It is difficult for Thomas Aquinas, Calvin or any other Christian theologian not to proclaim the ultimate unknowability of the infinite God – just as it is unimaginable for him not to proclaim, both as a Christian and as the ideological leader of a specific church, the knowability of God in many of its essential aspects, and revealed in the Bible and the teachings of a given church.

Personal experience

It is likely that the impersonal concept of the Absolute, crucial to Hick’s thinking, results from the religious experience he had. He did not, understandably, talk about it in his academic works, but he testified in an interview recorded for *Closer to Truth*. Evidently, in a surprising way, he indirectly implies that he has never experienced the theistically understood Absolute. He therefore indirectly admits that his academic career spanning

several decades, in which he taught theism, and what is more, his adherence to a theistic worldview from childhood³⁵ and his decision to become a Presbyterian priest in 1953, were not based on any religious or mystical experience. The basis of his mature worldview – at least the worldview from the period before giving the interview and undoubtedly from the period of writing the book *An Interpretation of Religion* and later years of his work – was the mystical experience of the impersonal Absolute:

And my personal religious experience is not of the personal God, it is of the transcendent reality that is beyond. In Paul Tillich's famous phrase it is God beyond the God of theism (...). Now I had one of these very brief, vivid experiences once myself. But the great many people had. [From this experience we can infer that] There is something beyond the physical. And then you see we are confronted with religions and their very different ideas of what it is. I think we have to postulate a reality that is not identical with any one of them in order to understand their being, a transcendent reality of some kind³⁶.

The proof that the mystical experience that Hick had was not something fleeting, but constituted a new basis for his philosophy of religion, is the emphasis that Hick placed in the interview on the need to take into account religious experiences in the philosophy of religion – in the area of reflection on these “data that need to be explained.” His mystical experience had an important, although undisclosed in academic writings, methodological function in his philosophy of religion – it was something as important as the observation of a disturbing multiplicity of contradictory religious views: “There are certain data that need to be explained. One is there are a number of religions in the world. And other is that in their doctrines they contradict one another. But the very important datum which naturalists do not take into account is what I would call religious experience.”³⁷

These statements allow us to better understand the fidelity to the impersonal worldview in John Hick's religious pluralism. It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that the experience of the impersonal Absolute was the basis for the various forms of affirmation of theological impersonalism in *An Interpretation of Religion* discussed in this article. As we have seen, Hick gives expression to this experience not in the form of statements expressing theological impersonalism as his declared position. He gives it expression in an indirect and implicit form in the context of his concept of religious pluralism. However, this concept, as a legacy of the theistic tradition, was already a foreign body in relation to this experience, although as a rhetorical tool it was appropriately chosen: it enabled Hick to express in an unembarrassing and academically acceptable way what he

underwent in a mystical experience, without having to appear clearly eccentric and entering what in the contemporary, agnostic-atheistic Western philosophy, is the muddy ground of the metaphysics of the impersonal Absolute³⁸. Apart from some ancient philosophers (Plato, the Stoics, Plotinus), (partly) Eckhart and Jacob Böhme, theological impersonalism of a Western provenance did not have many supporters in the academic world in the past, and today it has almost none. Outside the academic world, it is present in the New Age movement, but due to its eclecticism, superficiality, commercialization and practices sometimes perceived as bizarre, this movement discourages Western professional philosophers and theologians from serious engagement with its assumptions and practices. Hick began to profess theological impersonalism at a relatively late age (his *An Interpretation of Religion* was published when the philosopher was 67 years old). Serious research on Eastern thought would take him many long years. As an academic philosopher, Hick could not do this also because he did not know any Eastern language. Therefore, deciding to pursue professional, academic research on Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta would likely have been an extremely difficult challenge for him.

The concept of religious pluralism turned out to be a good tool for propagating the idea of theological impersonalism, which is not burdened with all these difficulties. It was a short but effective version of bearing witness to the astonishing mystical experience Hick had had. This concept, as we have seen, first equated *impersonae* and *personae* of the Absolute, introducing impersonalism into the current of modern Western thought. Then it implicitly gave the Absolute attributes similar to those possessed by the *impersonae* – more precisely, it gave them the lack of all attributes. Thanks to the equalization, impersonalism gained the same dignity as theistic religions, especially Christianity, while thanks to the concept of the *Real an sich*, it was imperceptibly elevated as adequate to reality, in the light of which the *personae* of the Absolute turned into ordinary human delusions.

NOTES

¹ See, for example: D. Cheetham, *A Critical Introduction and Reflection*, Ashgate 2003; D. S. Nah, *Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism. A Critical Evaluation of John Hick*, Eugene 2012; *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. G. D'Costa, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1990.

² See J. Hick, *God has many names*, Philadelphia 1980.

³ R. D. Geivett, *John Hick's Approach to Religious Pluralism*, "Proceedings of the Wheaton Theology Conference", 1 (Spring 1992), p. 49.

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⁴ Which is why it is hard to agree with a view that Hick's thesis remains in accordance with religious traditions. See S. Sugirtharajah, *John Hick's Religious Pluralism: Home and Abroad*, In: *John Hick's Religious Pluralism in Global Perspective*, ed. S. Sugirtharajah, London 2023, p. 21.

⁵ J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New York 2004, p. xxiv

⁶ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁷ Ibid., p. xxiv.

⁸ Ibid., p. 246.

⁹ Ibid., p. 278. Emphasis in bold mine – Z. K.

¹⁰ Ibid. Also: ibid, p. 234, particularly p. 291.

¹¹ J. Hick, *Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason*, New York 2010, p. 22.

¹² J. Hick, *God and Christianity according to Swinburne*, "European Journal for Philosophy of Religion", (2) 1 (2010), p. 27. That very same view Hick expresses in the interview *Closer to Truth*: J. Hick, *What is God*, <https://www.closetotruth.com/interviews/2402>, access: 16.03.2021.

¹³ J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 26. Emphasis mine – Z.K.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 23. Emphasis mine – Z. K.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 300; emphasis mine – Z. K.

²¹ In the book *God has many names* – a bit earlier work than *An Interpretation of Religion* which is the focal one for this article – the tendency to emphasise inferiority of indigenous religions is also very clear. See J. Hick, *God has many names*, p. 44. Compare similar thesis in: W. Cantwell Smith, *Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?*, In: *The History of Religion: Essays in Methodology*, eds. J. Kitigawa & M. Eliade, Chicago 1959, p. 38. Interestingly, in other places *An Interpretation of Religion* accepts the idea of the superiority of "world faiths" over "the primal and archaic" religions as an unresolved issue. J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 164.

²² See. J. Tsonis, *Don't say All Religions Are Equal Unless You Really Mean It: John Hick, the axial Age, and the Academic Study of Religion*, <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.14/289651>, access: 23.11.2018; unpublished doctoral thesis.

²³ See J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. xxvi.

²⁴ J. Hick, *The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin d'Costa*, "Religious Studies", Vol. 33, No. 2 (Jun., 1997), 162. pp. 161–166.

²⁵ J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. xxiv. Emphasis mine – Z. K.

²⁶ *Daily Inspiration from His Holiness The Dalai Lama*, New York 2024, p. 31.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For instance in a work published 9 years before *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick he conceptualizes the Absolute in a distinctly theistic way. See J. Hick, *God has many names*, p. 48.

²⁹ W. C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, New York 1962, p. 132–133.

³⁰ See Z. Kaźmierczak, *O kluczowej decyzji terminologicznej w pluralizmie religijnym Johna Hicka*, “Rocznik Teologiczny”, 1 (LXIII) 2021, p. 263–288.

³¹ See J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. xx.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. xlii.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 239.

³⁵ Let us notice that still over 10 years prior to *An Interpretation of Religion*, in 1980 r. Hick wrote that “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” J. Hick, *God has many names*, p. 2.

³⁶ *What is God? – John Hick*; <https://www.closertotruth.com/interviews/2402>, access: 9.05.22.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See R. Ambler, *John Hick’s pluralism: my experience of 40 years*, ‘Interreligious Insight’, vol. 2, no. 1, June 2023, p. 6–11.

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